



Practicing the 9 Arts of  
**Spiritual  
Conversations**

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# Getting Started

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## WITH THE 9 ARTS COMPLETE GUIDE

Getting good at anything takes practice. And the pathway to mastery begins with the basics. For example, almost every driver on the road started with the basics in Drivers Ed. Truck drivers, school bus drivers, and even INDY 500 drivers all started in Drivers Ed. We all sat in a classroom, learning the road signs and taking multiple-choice tests. But the *Rules of the Road* booklet didn't make us drivers. We didn't become drivers until we actually got behind the wheel and practiced.

When you start practicing, being out on the road is overwhelming. But sure enough, as you pay attention to specific skills and put them together behind the wheel, you begin to improve. Then before long, driving begins to feel natural—at least whenever you are in a familiar context. But when you encounter a new situation—for example, one-way streets in a big city, or rush-hour traffic on an expressway—there's more to learn.

There are many parallels between becoming a driver and carrying out the Great Commission. In Matthew 29:18-20, Jesus made a point of saying that all authority in heaven and earth had been given to him; and with that authority, his instruction was to “go and make disciples.” As a Christian, that's an important part of your calling and purpose. So how are you going to do it?

It starts with the basics. Jesus modeled nine simple practices that pave the way for effective spiritual conversations and discipleship. And once you understand these basic skills, getting out there to practice is essential. With practice, before long, relating with people around you begins to feel natural—until you hit a new challenge. Then it's important to deepen your understanding and take practicing to new levels. That's what *Practicing the 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations: Complete Guide* is all about.

### HOW TO USE THIS COMPLETE GUIDE

*Practicing the 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations: Complete Guide* is curriculum that digs deeply into each of nine practices that will help you talk about God with anyone. If you have read *The 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations* book or if you have gone through *Practicing the 9 Arts of Spiritual*

*Conversations: Primer*, you are familiar with nine simple practices revealed in the way that Jesus interacted with people around him. The 9 Arts Complete Guide curriculum will take you to deeper levels of understanding. With 36 sessions, it includes all of the material from the 9 Arts Primer along with three additional sessions on each art so you can overcome obstacles and grow stronger in the nine practices. (If this is the first time you have encountered the 9 Arts, you may find it helpful and inspiring to read *The 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations* by Mary Schaller and John Crilly.<sup>1</sup>)

This curriculum works best when you go through it with others. This may be done one on one or in a triad (3 people), a small group, or mid-sized group with plenty of break-out time for small group discussion. (See the next section, “Group Options,” for notes on different sized groups.) By meeting weekly with others who are also going through the 9 Arts Complete Guide and putting the 9 Arts into practice, you are far more likely to make strides as a result of the built-in accountability, encouragement, support, and prayer. If you are going through the material and practicing on your own, you can also build a supportive community by sharing what you discover with a few people who will pray for you and encourage you as they listen to your stories.

The 9 Arts Complete Guide content is designed to be facilitated, not taught. Experts are not needed—just facilitators to help everyone share their thoughts and keep the discussion moving along using the structure set up for each session. The goal is for everyone in the group to be learning from each other, practicing, and sharing stories—both highs and lows—so you can all grow and encourage each other.

To get started, each person joining you should have a copy of this guide. If participants are able to read the material and consider the questions ahead of time, then the group can go right to the discussion questions and practices when they get together. If the group is not able to read before meeting, then be sure to allow at least 75 minutes together so participants can take turns reading a paragraph at a time to understand the content before discussing and practicing it.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Schaller and John Crilly, *The 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016).

## GROUP OPTIONS

### Small Groups

The 9 Arts Complete Guide is set up for small groups with plenty of discussion and mutual support as you practice and learn together. If you are a small group leader, think “Guide on the Side” (facilitator) instead of “Sage on the Stage” (expert/teacher). Ideally, two or three facilitators spearhead the planning and logistics, and in each session they guide the group through the questions and practices, relying on the material itself to take the group on a journey of discovery about the topic.

### Triads

A small group of three (or four people if you have two couples) is a great size for transparency and accountability in practicing the 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations. As a triad, you may go through this curriculum while in the process of starting a Q Place, especially if you are short on relationships with people outside of Christian circles.

A Q Place is a small group of 2-12 people who meet to discuss questions about life, God, and the Bible. Lots of Christians get excited about the idea of starting a Q Place with people who believe differently, but then the reality hits that they don't know people to invite. Practicing the 9 Arts opens up conversations and helps to build trust with people all around you, so that inviting them to a Q Place seems reasonable.

If you are going through the 9 Arts Complete Guide with the mindset of starting a Q Place, you will get to know each other better as future Q Place facilitators; you can pray together for people you are getting to know, whom you may invite to a Q Place; and you will also grow in practices that will help you facilitate more vibrant discussions once you do start your group.

### Mid-Size Groups

A mid-size group would include weekly Sunday school or Christian education classes, men's and women's groups, and a variety of church-based discipleship groups. For maximum impact, set up a weekly format that includes: (1) sharing stories (experiences from the previous week's practices), (2) digging into the content, and (3) a time of prayer.

The ideal time frame for each session in the 9 Arts Complete Guide is 75 minutes. Round tables work best, with a facilitator and six to eight participants at each table. A host can welcome everyone, facilitate the larger group sharing of

stories, and keep the entire class on track.

If your venue is limited to theater-style seating, you can still break into groups of two or three to discuss questions and share stories, and then share key insights with the larger group. This way you can manage the time well, and everyone gets to talk. In a class setting, don't presume that everyone has read the content ahead of time. During the session, have the participants (not facilitators) read the content out loud within their breakout groups.

Keep the same groups week after week. With that consistency, participants can build relationships and support each other throughout the sessions. When you're with the same people, you can hear how each week of practice goes, hold each other accountable, and notice progress over time. You could launch the 9 Arts content at each session by playing a five-minute 9 Arts video clip (available through Q Place) as a conversation starter. For a variety of scheduling options, see "Series Options for the 9 Arts" on the next few pages.

### Church-Wide Series

Your whole church can go on a 9 Arts journey together. Q Place offers outlines for a sermon series on the 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations and best practices for launching a church-wide initiative to improve in these important conversational skills.

For the greatest impact in your church, a 9 Arts sermon series would be presented in the same time frame that groups in your church are going through the 9 Arts Complete Guide and actively practicing the skills that they learn. In this way, group discussions and practices reinforce the message given from the pulpit.

To build enthusiasm in the weeks leading up to your sermon series, you may find it helpful to present one of the 9 Arts video clips available from Q Place.

The following pages provide a variety of scheduling options to fit the needs of your congregation and the number of weeks you will dedicate to a 9 Arts series.

### On Your Own

You can go through this curriculum on your own, taking time to think or write out your responses to each question and committing to practice the skill that you learn each week. If at all possible, find someone who will be glad to hear about what you are doing, who can encourage you and even help you practice some of the skills.

## SERIES OPTIONS FOR THE 9 ARTS

### 1. One 10-Week Overview Session

You can cover the Introductory Session and one of the 9 Arts each week (typically starting in September or January).

Session	
Week	Topic: 9 ARTS
1	<i>Introduction to the 9 Arts</i>
2	<i>1.1 Noticing</i>
3	<i>2.1 Praying</i>
4	<i>3.1 Listening</i>
5	<i>4.1 Asking Questions</i>
6	<i>5.1 Loving</i>
7	<i>6.1 Welcoming</i>
8	<i>7.1 Facilitating</i>
9	<i>8.1 Serving Together</i>
10	<i>9.1 Sharing</i>

### 2. Two 6-Week Overview Sessions

You can spread the series over a longer span of time, with the first session focusing on arts that are more easily practiced on your own through individual interactions (Noticing, Praying, Listening, Asking Questions, and Loving), and the second session involving arts that are more oriented toward group interactions (Welcoming, Facilitating, and Serving Together), as well as the Art of Sharing.

Session 1		Session 2	
Week	Topic	Week	Topic
1	<i>Introduction to the 9 Arts</i>	1	<i>Testimonies from 1<sup>st</sup> session</i>
2	<i>1.1 Noticing</i>	2	<i>6.1 Welcoming</i>
3	<i>2.1 Praying</i>	3	<i>7.1 Facilitating</i>
4	<i>3.1 Listening</i>	4	<i>8.1 Serving Together</i>
5	<i>4.1 Asking Questions</i>	5	<i>9.1 Sharing</i>
6	<i>5.1 Loving</i>	6	<i>Summary</i>

### 3. Three 3-Week Overview Sessions

You could take smaller chunks at a time, dividing the 9 Arts into three natural categories:

**Getting Ready** for spiritual conversations  
(Noticing, Praying, Listening)

**Getting Started** with spiritual conversations  
(Asking Questions, Loving, Welcoming)

**Keeping It Going**  
(Facilitating, Serving Together, Sharing)

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
Week	GETTING READY	GETTING STARTED	KEEPING IT GOING
1	<i>1.1 Noticing</i>	<i>4.1 Asking Questions</i>	<i>7.1 Facilitating</i>
2	<i>2.1 Praying</i>	<i>5.1 Loving</i>	<i>8.1 Serving Together</i>
3	<i>3.1 Listening</i>	<i>6.1 Welcoming</i>	<i>9.1 Sharing</i>

### 4. One 4-Week Deeper Session

You could choose just one of the 9 Arts to cover in depth for four weeks. Here are two examples:

Sample Session	
Week	Topic: NOTICING
1	<i>1.1 Why Notice?</i>
2	<i>1.2 Are We Paying Attention?</i>
3	<i>1.3 What Is Secret Prayer?</i>
4	<i>1.4 Are We Genuinely Listening?</i>

Sample Session	
Week	Topic: ASKING QUESTIONS
1	<i>4.1 Why Ask Questions?</i>
2	<i>4.2 Why Don't We Ask Good Questions?</i>
3	<i>4.3 What Are Good Questions?</i>
4	<i>4.4 How Can We Ask Good Questions?</i>

## 5. Nine Months in the 9 Arts

You could plan for a year's worth of adult Sunday school classes, focusing on one art each month. (Use the occasional 5th Sunday to adjust this schedule and accommodate holidays.)

	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Week	<i>Noticing</i>	<i>Praying</i>	<i>Listening</i>	<i>Asking Questions</i>	<i>Loving</i>	<i>Welcoming</i>	<i>Facilitating</i>	<i>Serving Together</i>	<i>Sharing</i>
<b>1</b>	1.1	2.1	3.1	4.1	5.1	6.1	7.1	8.1	9.1
<b>2</b>	1.2	2.2	3.2	4.2	5.2	6.2	7.2	8.2	9.2
<b>3</b>	1.3	2.3	3.3	4.3	5.3	6.3	7.3	8.3	9.3
<b>4</b>	1.4	2.4	3.4	4.4	5.4	6.4	7.4	8.4	9.4

## 6. A Quarterly Deep-Dive in Three Arts

You can dig deeply into one category of the 9 Arts, covering just one quarter of a Sunday school year at a time. If you have already gone through a series with the 9 Arts Primer, you can set up a variation of this Deep-Dive schedule to go through the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th sessions of each art.

Quarter 1: GETTING READY	
Week	Topic
<b>1</b>	<i>Noticing 1.1</i>
<b>2</b>	1.2
<b>3</b>	1.3
<b>4</b>	1.4
<b>5</b>	<i>Praying 2.1</i>
<b>6</b>	2.2
<b>7</b>	2.3
<b>8</b>	2.4
<b>9</b>	<i>Listening 3.1</i>
<b>10</b>	3.2
<b>11</b>	3.3
<b>12</b>	3.4
<b>13</b>	<i>Review/Share Stories</i>

Quarter 2: GETTING STARTED	
Week	Topic
<b>1</b>	<i>Asking Questions 4.1</i>
<b>2</b>	4.2
<b>3</b>	4.3
<b>4</b>	4.4
<b>5</b>	<i>Loving 5.1</i>
<b>6</b>	5.2
<b>7</b>	5.3
<b>8</b>	5.4
<b>9</b>	<i>Welcoming 6.1</i>
<b>10</b>	6.2
<b>11</b>	6.3
<b>12</b>	6.4
<b>13</b>	<i>Review/Share Stories</i>

Quarter 3: KEEPING IT GOING	
Week	Topic
<b>1</b>	<i>Facilitating 7.1</i>
<b>2</b>	7.2
<b>3</b>	7.3
<b>4</b>	7.4
<b>5</b>	<i>Serving Together 8.1</i>
<b>6</b>	8.2
<b>7</b>	8.3
<b>8</b>	8.4
<b>9</b>	<i>Sharing 9.1</i>
<b>10</b>	9.2
<b>11</b>	9.3
<b>12</b>	9.4
<b>13</b>	<i>Review/Share Stories</i>

## PREPARING TO FACILITATE THE COMPLETE GUIDE

### The Role of the Facilitator

Facilitating the 9 Arts Complete Guide with an inductive learning approach may be a paradigm shift from the typical Sunday school class or small group environment that you have led prior to this one. Traditionally, an instructor or leader has knowledge and content to download to the group's participants. The leader is the expert, and participants are there to learn from that expert.

In an inductive learning environment, facilitators have a different role to play—to facilitate learning as a guide, not an expert. The one who is leading does not have to have all of the answers. When no one needs to be an expert, more people get to share in the ownership of a group's learning.

### Facilitator Tips

#### Before the group meets:

1. Prepare by reading through the material in advance of each session.
2. Invite God into your preparation and ask him to help you understand and apply the material. Pray for your group.
3. Spend some time doing the exercises ahead of time.
4. Decide which questions and practices in the session will best meet the needs of group members so you can be sure to give them priority in the time allotted for your session.
5. Make sure the room is conducive to group discussion by having people sit at round tables or in a circle. It is best to break up into smaller groups of six to eight if you have a larger group. If more than one table or group is involved, ask someone at each table to facilitate, and help them understand the role of a facilitator.
6. Provide materials that will be used for the discussion.

#### In the group:

1. Begin and end the session on time.
2. Model the facilitation role of not being an expert who teaches but a guide who brings everyone along in the learning process.
3. Keep the group discussion on track and prevent tangents. Pace the group so that you have time to complete the material.
4. Find a way to involve all participants and affirm each person there.
5. Have people take turns reading the content out loud so that failing to pre-read doesn't discourage anyone from attending the sessions. Keep in mind that the curriculum has been thoughtfully structured for effectiveness and that the questions are designed to break up the reading and spark important discussions.
6. Keep the discussion going when it stalls by asking good questions or moving the group on to the next point.
7. Be an equal participant in learning along with the group.
8. Encourage everyone in the group to practice! Provide accountability by beginning each session with a check-in to share experiences with the "Practice on Your Own" exercise from the previous session. End by assigning the practice for the coming week.



# WHY CULTIVATE THESE PRACTICES?

## the **big** idea

With a fresh perspective and simple, everyday practices, any Christian can engage in the Great Commission.

### **ice breaker**

What kind of feeling does the term *evangelism* stir up inside you? How would you define *evangelism*?

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### **related Scripture**

*This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing.*

Matthew 10:42 (MSG)

### **challenging wisdom**

*Perhaps the most obvious observation is that most unchurched people are not being pursued by anyone.*

– George Barna

## TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Author Mark Mittelberg claims that evangelism is “one of the highest values in the church and one of the least practiced.” You’ll find it talked about from the pulpit, included in church mission statements, and written about in many books. Almost every Christian knows the Matthew 28:18-20 verses, commonly called the Great Commission, where Jesus tells his closest followers to go and make disciples of all nations. Mittelberg continues, “The irony is that while many of us are in churches and denominations that have a rich heritage and strong reputation for evangelism, in many cases, precious little is actually happening. Let’s be honest: in most ministries very few lost people are being reached for Christ.”<sup>1</sup> *Ouch!* Could this be true?

Evangelism in the 21st century has become an activity relegated to a small minority of Christians. Surveys on spiritual gifts conducted at Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Church revealed that only about 10% of their people identified that they possess the gift of evangelism or are passionate enough about it to participate regularly in sharing their faith. If that is representative of

the Christian community, then 90% of our team is still uninvolved in sharing the good news about Jesus. Jerry Root and Stan Guthrie, authors of *The Sacrament of Evangelism*, observe, “Evangelism has become the hobby of the few, rather than a joyful expectation of all.”<sup>2</sup>

Many Christians seem to believe that their main role in evangelism is to bring nonbelievers to church where a paid professional will tell them about Jesus. The evidence suggests that this attractional church model alone is not working well. When the Barna Research Group surveyed the aggregate body of unchurched adults, it found:

- 4% were invited to attend church with a friend and came
- 23% were invited to attend but declined
- 73% were never invited<sup>3</sup>

According to George Barna in his book *Rechurching the Unchurched*, “Perhaps the most obvious observation is that most unchurched people are not being pursued by anyone.”<sup>4</sup> The results from this combined data tell us that 73% of non-Christians are virtually ignored, while 90% of Christians remain inactive.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Mittelberg, *Building a Contagious Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Root & Stan Guthrie, *The Sacrament of Evangelism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2011), 56.

<sup>3</sup> George Barna, *Rechurching the Unchurched* (Ventura, CA: Issachar Resources, 2000), 111.

<sup>4</sup> Barna, 111.

**1 DISCUSS ::** Do you think that evangelism is the job of Christians with the spiritual gift of evangelism or of all Christians? Explain your answer.

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## HOW CAN ALL CHRISTIANS SHARE THE GOOD NEWS?

The word *evangelism* comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” If everyone who follows Jesus has good news to share with those who don’t know him, there must be a way to make evangelism simple and universal so that all of us are involved, not just a select few.

Pastor Francis Chan helps us understand what counts as good news: “God’s definition of what matters is pretty straightforward. He measures our lives by how we love.”<sup>5</sup> Our mandate from Jesus in Matthew 22:36-39 is clear: Love God, love people. Could it be that simple? We may have complicated evangelism by separating this Great Commandment from the Great Commission.

Loving God and loving others is the foundation of the Great Commission. To make disciples of people outside of our churches, you start by loving them, building authentic friendships based on trust, and earning the right to engage in conversations about God as he is revealed in the Bible.

**2 DISCUSS ::** What grade would you give yourself for making disciples (evangelism): A, B, C, D, or F? What grade would you give your church? Explain your answers.

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So how can all Christians engage in evangelism? We seem to value the big stuff: the grandiose Olympic opening ceremony; the game-winning, last-second score; the glamorous, opulent royal wedding. We can’t help ourselves. We eat it up.

We carry this perspective into our approach to evangelism. We like the big outreach event, the dramatic conversion, and closing the deal with the all-important sinner’s prayer. The little stuff doesn’t seem to matter as much to us. However, in order to share the good news

about Jesus intentionally today, we may have to start with a new perspective—focusing on the little things.

Consider a principle from a book called *The Tipping Point*,<sup>6</sup> in which journalist Malcolm Gladwell discusses why crime in New York City took a precipitous decline in the 1990s. Gladwell explains the Broken Window theory of criminology—that if a window is broken and left unrepaired in a neighborhood, people will slowly conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge, and more serious crimes will increase. To reverse the crime trend of the 1980s, NYPD focused on little things—graffiti, panhandling, subway turnstile jumping—and there was a reduction in overall crime quantity and severity. Many New York cops couldn’t understand why they were fixing windows when there were more serious crimes to address, but the little stuff really mattered, and had a remarkable impact.

**3 DISCUSS ::** What are some little things that could really matter in showing love to your non-Christian friends?

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Interestingly, the little things seemed to matter to Jesus too: “*And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded*” (Matthew 10:42, NLT). Water held great significance in the arid land of Israel in the first century. It was scarce. Water meant life, cleansing, refreshment.

In today’s evangelistic economy, little things don’t seem to count for much. But one could argue that small, simple steps—modern-day “cups of cold water” like paying attention to someone, listening to them, praying for them—should count as evangelism.

**4 DISCUSS ::** What do you think would be something in today’s culture that is scarce, that people would thirst for?

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Chan, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), 93.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (Little, Brown and Company, 2000).

**CUPS OF COLD WATER:  
SIMPLE CONVERSATION PRACTICES?**

Generally, we are poor conversationalists. We talk way too much. We listen very little. We offer our unsolicited opinions. We have short attention spans. We formulate our response while others are speaking. We are generally not curious. Mostly, we want to talk about ourselves.

If we are not good at ordinary conversations, how can we talk meaningfully about spiritual matters, which are often emotionally charged by our past experiences? We must be honest with ourselves. Even if we are good at small talk, most of us are not good at “God talk” with our family, our friends, our neighbors, our classmates, or our coworkers. Participating in the Great Commission will inevitably mean having conversations with people in ways that hopefully nudge them toward Jesus. So, we all need to improve in our conversational ability, to engage the spiritually curious, and to begin a journey of discovery with them about God and the Bible.

If evangelism is going to become a normal part of our lives, it will have to be something we enjoy doing and can truly envision doing tomorrow, next month, and five years from now. That’s why we need memorable activities that can be done by ordinary people as part of a normal routine, providing a pathway to spiritual conversations.

These activities, while simple, must be incorporated at a deep heart level. Like learning a musical instrument, getting good at spiritual conversations with those who believe differently from you is an art that takes practice. We at Q Place have identified nine simple practices that we call the 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations.™ They include *Arts for Getting Ready* for spiritual conversations: Noticing, Praying, Listening; *Arts for Getting Started* with spiritual conversations: Asking Questions, Loving, Welcoming; and *Arts for Keeping It Going*: Facilitating, Serving Together, and Sharing.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Can you recall a time when you had a spiritual conversation with someone that went well? How about one that didn’t go well? What were the differences?

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**ASSESS**  
 **How satisfied are you with how well you practice the 9 Arts?** Take this Spiritual Conversations Assessment and rate your level of effectiveness with each of the nine arts on a scale of 1 – 5. (1 = not satisfied at all, 5 = totally satisfied)

\_\_\_ **Noticing** those around me and paying close attention to what God might be doing in their lives.

\_\_\_ **Praying** for those I meet in my day-to-day life and asking God to show me what he wants me to do to bless them.

\_\_\_ **Listening** with genuine care, interest, and empathy as I interact with others without editorializing or offering my own unsolicited opinions.

\_\_\_ **Asking Questions** that arise from genuine curiosity, drawing others out with great questions, seeking to understand more than to be understood.

\_\_\_ **Loving** others authentically because I personally know God's love and see them with his eyes.

\_\_\_ **Welcoming** people by valuing their presence so that they feel that they belong.

\_\_\_ **Facilitating** good discussions in a group setting so that every person feels honored and respected, even when they believe differently from me.

\_\_\_ **Serving Together** by gathering people to serve and know God and each other better through service.

\_\_\_ **Sharing** my own story, learning others' stories, and expressing God's story of forgiveness through Jesus in a way that is respectful and meaningful.

**Discuss your assessment with the group. In which practices would you like to improve? (Examples: notice people more, ask better open-ended questions, listen more empathetically.) What actions will help you improve?**

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

In the coming week, become aware of how often you practice any of the 9 Arts during an average day. Journal these experiences. Write down the strengths and weaknesses you discover and share them the next time you meet.

Before the next meeting, intentionally do three simple things:

1. Notice, pray for, and listen to people.
2. Invite God to show you the people he wants you to notice, and be attentive to his promptings.
3. Keep a list of people God prompts you to notice.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

There are specific practices, or arts, that lead to authentic spiritual conversations. With practice and intentionality, Christians can improve in these nine simple areas and experience an increase in meaningful spiritual conversations

## QPlace STORY

Nancy was a new teacher in the school district. A few other teachers noticed her and recognized her need for new friends. These Christian teachers befriended Nancy and began praying for her, though she didn't know it. They prayed for opportunities to care for her, have loving conversations with her, and that God would open her heart to him. As they spent time together, Nancy appreciated how much these friends simply listened to her talk about her job, her family, her past, and her questions about God. While listening, they would often ask questions so they could get to know her better, understand her spiritual perspectives, and show they cared. Frequently, these friends welcomed her into their homes, to go hiking, to get a cup of coffee, and eventually to a group Bible study.

When they saw a need, they were quick to reach out and help,

as a natural part of their lives. Using these practices, anyone can engage in evangelism, sharing the good news about Jesus.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Corner Conversations* by Randy Newman (Kregel Publications)
- “Godly Conversation” by T. M. Moore in *ViewPoint*, 4/29/2010 (The Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview)
- *Rechurching the Unchurched* by George Barna (Issachar Resources)
- “Nothing Much to Talk About? The Importance of Conversation” by T. M. Moore, in *Breakpoint*, 4/9/2007 (The Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview)
- *The Forgotten Ways* by Alan Hirsch (Brazos Press)
- *Building a Contagious Church* by Mark Mittelberg (Zondervan)

demonstrating love to Nancy in real, tangible ways. As she began to attend the Bible study, the group encouraged Nancy to ask questions and accepted her for who she was and where she was spiritually. The group discussions were facilitated in a way that focused on discovery and everyone learning together. This put Nancy at ease.

Eventually, Nancy's friends invited her to attend church with them. She willingly accepted because she felt she could trust them. Nancy's sense of belonging and purpose deepened when she was invited to serve with the others, and she felt closer to the group than ever. Throughout this time together, trust developed and her friends began naturally sharing the good news of Jesus with Nancy. The prayers they had been praying were answered and Nancy committed her life to Jesus.



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4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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***Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.***

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# The Art of Noticing

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**1.1 WHY NOTICE?**

**1.2 ARE WE PAYING ATTENTION?**

**1.3 WHAT IS SECRET PRAYER?**

**1.4 ARE WE GENUINELY LISTENING?**





# WHY NOTICE?

## the **big** idea

The first step in developing a relationship with anyone starts with noticing them.

### ice breaker

Describe a time when someone noticed something positive about you and then told you about it. How did it feel to be noticed?

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### related **Scripture**

*“And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”*

Matthew 10:42 (NIV)

### challenging **wisdom**

*My new perspective of understanding and loving God like never before gave me a new set of eyes through which to view people. With these new God goggles, I didn't just see people. I saw lost people. People with a name. People with a story. Good people. Good parents. Good neighbors. Yet they were lost people, and I barely even knew their names.*

– Melody Allred

## IT STARTS WITH NOTICING

A precursor of knowing someone is noticing them. As Doug Pollock writes in his book *God Space*, noticing is a “prerequisite to caring about others and serving them in tangible ways that smuggle the gospel into their hearts.”<sup>1</sup>

*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”* Matthew 9:36-38 (NIV)

When was Jesus moved with compassion for the crowds? When he **saw** them. He **noticed** the crowds first, and was consequently moved with compassion and a desire for workers who could shepherd them. The disciples might have missed the tremendous needs of the crowd had Jesus not pointed out their harassed and helpless state.

How about us? Do we see the helpless and hopeless condition of people we come in contact with every day?

Because people matter to God, they should matter to us. Giving people the gift of our time and attention demonstrates their value to us as a treasure, pursued by God.

 **DISCUSS** :: Describe a time when you noticed someone or something and took the time to respond to what you noticed. How did it change you?

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Noticing is really the first step in bringing someone the good news about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. It's good news for the people who are noticed and it impacts our own faith in God. As Jerry Root and Stan Guthrie explain, “Evangelism doesn't ‘do anything’ to God—it does something to *us*. It opens our eyes to His work and grace” and it provides us with “the opportunity to experience participating with this omnipotent, omnipresent God as He woos others to Himself.”<sup>2</sup>

## JESUS IS OUR MODEL OF NOTICING

Jesus was masterful at noticing people. In Luke 19, he is on his way to the big city of Jericho, surrounded by crowds of people lining the street to catch a glimpse of him. Jesus is

<sup>1</sup> Doug Pollock, *God Space* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing Inc., 2009), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Root & Stan Guthrie, *The Sacrament of Evangelism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2011), 17.

attentive enough to notice one guy up in a tree (Zacchaeus), and it transforms the man's life.

*Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)*

It's interesting in this account that Jesus noticed Zacchaeus *first*. While Zacchaeus had a desire to see Jesus, it was Jesus who took the first step to personally initiate contact with him.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Why do you think Jesus noticed Zacchaeus?

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As you are going about your daily routines, what interferes with your ability to notice people?

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Jesus came to seek and save the lost. The action verb *to seek* means "to go in search of, to try to find or discover by searching or questioning." Jesus noticed people personally and collectively, and it moved him to compassion and action. Consider what happened later in Luke 19: "As [Jesus] approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it..." (verse 41, NIV).

Or in an earlier chapter:

*Soon afterward Jesus went with his disciples to the village of Nain, and a large crowd followed him. A funeral procession was coming out as he approached the village gate. The young man who had died was a widow's only son, and a large crowd from the village was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion. Luke 7:11-13 (NLT)*

Noticing people can move us to compassion and action as it humanizes the nameless faces around us. People become real to us, with real lives and real problems in need of a real Savior.

Noticing is a relational act of kindness. While Jesus is our model for this important practice, ordinary people can do this too. You probably already do it, but now you can practice it more intentionally. Success is in the intention and the effort, not solely in the results.

**3 DISCUSS ::** How compassionate are you toward people you know?

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People you don't know?

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How could you become more compassionate?

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**NOTICING COUNTS IN EVANGELISM**

The word *evangelism* means "good news." When Jesus noticed people, it was good news! Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 10:42 NIV, "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

In the arid climate of the Middle East during the time of Jesus, water was a refreshing treat to ease the common thirst. What if our offer of good news started with a small, refreshing step—simply giving thirsty people the relational equivalent of a cup of water? In our busy, self-absorbed culture, simply noticing is the equivalent of a cup of water.

**4 DISCUSS ::** Do you think a practice like noticing “counts” as evangelism? Why or why not?

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How could this perspective change your view or approach toward evangelism?

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### THREE SIMPLE WAYS TO PRACTICE NOTICING

#### 1. Paying Attention

It costs you something to stay focused on someone else even for a few minutes. It costs you time, attention, and sometimes, even money. This simple, nonspeaking practice is more than a glance at another human being. It’s concentrating on someone long enough *to wonder* about him or her. This “spiritual peripheral vision” is not hunting for a victim; it’s simply paying attention to people you ordinarily come into contact with during each day and opening your heart to where God may be at work. Think about questions like: *What is her story? Where is he from? Is she happy, sad, angry, lonely?* Make a mental note about what you observe. This practice helps you see another person with God’s eyes of love and compassion. Nobody knows you’re doing this except God, who is always delighted when we take our focus off ourselves and our own agendas for a moment to pay attention to someone else. It takes no bravery—just intentionality.

#### 2. Secret Prayer

Praying for people behind their backs is another simple, silent practice of the Art of Noticing. Don’t stare or be creepy. Just pay attention to someone and discreetly send up a silent prayer. Jesus values things done in secret:

*But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.* Matthew 6:3-4 (NIV)

#### 3. Genuine Listening

Paying attention to someone may prompt you to start a dialogue; this is your chance to *evangelize with your ears*. This requires that you look the person in the eye, conveying your interest and attention. Ask, “How *are* you?” or “How are you *really*?” Then wait, and really listen. No speaking allowed except to ask clarifying questions. No agenda allowed to fix or convince. Resist offering your own unsolicited opinions.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Which one of the three ways of noticing described above is easiest for you? The most difficult?

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The Art of Noticing is a starting point for building more genuine, caring friendships with people who are separated from God. It’s a set of doable practices that get us “in the game” during our normal life routines. By practicing the Art of Noticing, we will begin to recognize that people are longing for our attention (which is like “a cup of cold water” to them), we will become aware of what God is up to right where we are as we secretly pray for people behind their backs, and we will find ourselves authentically engaged in conversation as we learn to really listen to them.

The Art of Noticing is unimimidating and life-giving. It doesn’t require memorizing or presenting anything. It doesn’t call for any courage on your part. The important thing is that you start *doing* it. It changes your view of God (he gets bigger!). It changes your view of others (they begin to matter to you in ways you can’t explain). And it changes YOU!

**6 PRACTICE ::** Take 30 seconds to look across the room and pay attention to someone. (Don’t stare. Just look at them peripherally.)

**Ask yourself some questions about this person:**

What do you observe? What don’t you know?  
What stands out?

**Secretly pray for this person.**

**Discuss:** What did you observe about the person?  
What did you observe about yourself?

What steps can you take to improve in noticing others?



**ASSESS**

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 = excellent), how would you rate yourself in how well you:

- \_\_\_ Pay attention to others?
- \_\_\_ Pray secretly for them?
- \_\_\_ Genuinely listen?

Which one would you like to improve most, and why?

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- Ask at least three questions to yourself about each person.
- Pray secretly for each one.
- Write down your observations (and any secret prayers) and be prepared to share your experiences at the next session.

**GETTING THE BIG IDEA**

Through simple, ordinary practices like paying attention to people around us, God begins to change our hearts and we begin to wonder about people and care for them.

**RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT**

- Awareness Test: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoay4>
- *Evangelism Without Additives* by Jim Henderson (Waterbrook Press)
- *God Space* by Doug Pollock (Group Publishing Inc.)
- *The Next Door* by Melody Allred (Melody Allred)

**PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN**

Try paying attention to three different people this week. Spend a few moments wondering about them. Don't go out of your way to hunt for some poor victim, just pay attention to someone where you normally go, in your ordinary, everyday life.

**QPlace STORY**

While sitting in the waiting room of her doctor's office, Bethany chose not to bury her nose in a magazine, but instead to pay attention to the only person present, the receptionist.

Bethany noted that the receptionist was a brown-eyed woman in her twenties with long, dark hair. She wore blue scrubs and had a nice manner with people on the phone. She hadn't quite finished her lunch; Bethany could hear the occasional crunch of chips behind the wall as the receptionist grabbed a quick bite. She looked coworkers directly in the eyes when she spoke with them.

Bethany had to take rather quick glances because the receptionist

was mindful of her presence and she was trying to avoid that awkward mutual glance . . . the one when both people accidentally look at each other at the same time and then, with embarrassment, quickly avert their eyes back to the floor.

As other patients entered and sat down, Bethany also paid attention to them. The silence was never broken by anyone. However, for twenty minutes of her day Bethany gave her mind a rest from thoughts revolving around herself, and intentionally paid attention to others.



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# ARE WE PAYING ATTENTION?

## the **big** idea

When you intentionally pay attention to people around you, you will begin to see them differently.

### **ice breaker**

In the course of daily activities, how often do you really pay attention to people around you?

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### **related Scripture**

*A Samaritan traveling the road came [upon the injured man]. When he saw the man's condition, his heart went out to him. Luke 10:33 (MSG)*

*I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. John 4:35 (NIV)*

### **challenging wisdom**

*I've found a direct correlation between how I view my world and what I'm moved to do. When I start seeing the world the way Jesus does, I'm moved to do something about it in his name. . . . It's easy to miss something you're not looking for. Haven't you found that to be true? I think this is the big idea in the story of the good Samaritan. . . . If it truly is easy to miss something we're not really looking for, then maybe we need to increase our awareness. . . . When we start to notice others . . . something happens inside us.*

– Doug Pollock

## SEEING WITH NEW EYES

Pastor John Ortberg writes of *noticing* as the spiritual discipline of seeing God at work all around you. Exercising this discipline challenges us to broaden our focus, slow down our pace of life, and witness God's grace in ordinary people, things, and events. In the study of grace in the Pursuing Spiritual Transformation series, Ortberg shares what it means to live in grace and how it relates to noticing:

If we want to live in grace, we must develop eyes that see. We must learn what might be called the discipline of noticing. To notice something—to truly pay attention—is a powerful thing. . . . The practice of noticing is a skill. It involves learning to pay attention to gifts that we otherwise take for granted. . . . They are gracious gifts. And what's even more amazing is that their Giver is lovingly present with you even as you are experiencing them.<sup>1</sup>

In his book *My Name Is Asher Lev*, Chiam Potok's main character is an awakening artist, beginning to see the world with a different perspective. The author captures a simple moment at a family dinner from the emerging artist's point of view:

That was the night I began to realize that something was happening to my eyes. I looked at my father and saw lines and planes I had never seen before. I could feel with my eyes. I could feel my eyes moving across the lines around his eyes and into and over the deep furrows on his forehead. He was thirty-five years old, and there were lines on his face and forehead. I could feel the lines with my eyes and feel, too, the long straight flat bridge of his nose and the clear darkness of his eyes and the strong thick curves of the red eyebrows and the thick red hair of his beard graying a little—I saw the stray gray strands in the tangle of hair below his lips. I could feel lines and points and

planes. I could feel texture and color. . . . I felt myself flooded with the shapes and textures of the world around me. I closed my eyes. But I could still see that way inside my head. I was seeing with another pair of eyes that had suddenly come awake.<sup>2</sup>

What if we paid attention to people with a new set of eyes that "suddenly came awake"? What if we focused on others instead of on our own agendas?

**1 DISCUSS ::** Have you ever noticed something (or someone) in your daily routine for the first time, only to realize that it (he or she) was always there? What prompted you to notice? What does this reveal to you about paying attention?

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### A SMALL INVESTMENT CAN LEAD TO A BIG RETURN

The American College of Sports Medicine recently stated that "exercise lite," in which a total of thirty minutes a day is broken up into smaller segments, will help maintain, although not build, fitness. Even if you have no time for long workouts, you can still benefit by doing mini workouts. What if paying attention worked the same way? What if you were to make a habit of paying attention to someone for just 30 seconds each day?

To develop a habit, you follow a certain behavior pattern regularly until it becomes involuntary. For example, a parent teaches a child the habit of looking both ways before crossing the street. With regular practice, before long, the child develops the habit. What if we could develop and practice simple habits throughout our day that helped us pay attention to people? These small attempts count. The more we practice, the better we get.

**2 DISCUSS ::** What new patterns or small changes during your day would help you begin to develop the habit of paying attention to people?

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Paying attention reaps huge benefits. The single most significant benefit is that it transforms us. We begin to see

others, ourselves, and even God differently. People we never noticed before (not because they weren't there, but because we never paid attention to them) quite suddenly matter to us in ways we can't explain. We find that the more we pay attention to others, the less we are absorbed with our own agenda and life.

This is not another thing to put on your "to-do" list. It's a way of living that causes regular intersection with God's activity in the frantic routines of your ordinary life. You don't have to assess who is a Christian and who is not, just practice paying attention to whomever is in your periphery and see what develops. Look for what God is up to in people of all kinds, wherever you normally go. This practice transforms you into a spiritual archeologist, discovering God's activity in people all around you and becoming more and more fascinated in what you find.

**3 DISCUSS ::** What do you think the term "spiritual archeologist" means? Could you consider yourself one? Why or why not?

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Can you think of anyone in your own life who fits that description?

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### COMMON BARRIERS THAT PREVENT US FROM PAYING ATTENTION

Paying attention is the spiritual practice (a.k.a. discipline) of intentionally observing someone who is in your view at the moment, wherever you are. But our everyday lives are filled with obstacles that need to be overcome. Here are some potential barriers along with practices that may help you overcome them:

#### 1. Pace of Life

Everybody is very busy these days. We are all rushing around trying to get our "to-do" list done before we have to be somewhere. Being busy and rushed usually keeps our focus sharply on ourselves, our agendas, our needs. This makes it almost impossible to focus on anyone else, even if they're right in front of us. One way to overcome this barrier is to decide to break up your schedule with 30-second noticing sessions.

Go where you normally go, do what you normally do, but plan on spending at least 30 seconds paying attention to someone who is there with you. A bit of intentionality is needed here. But you can resume your agenda after that. You may find yourself slowing down a little because it's fun, and you'll want to do more of it.

## 2. Self-Focus

To be willing to notice someone, you have to take your eyes off of yourself and be interruptible. What if we welcomed the possibility that an interruption might be a divine appointment? Too often we respond to interruptions as impediments to our own agendas. One way to overcome this barrier of self-focus is to intentionally direct your full attention to whomever is in your peripheral view and consider the possibility that God is inviting you to engage in what he or she is doing in the moment.

## 3. Christian Bubble

Those of us who are involved in churches tend to spend much of our free time absorbed in “fellowship” or church work with other Christians and rarely get close enough to people who don't move in our Christian circles. To overcome this barrier, you can make a point of recognizing other people who are already part of your everyday life—at the store, at work, at school, at the baseball field, in your neighborhood. There are hundreds of people all around you every day, wherever you go, desperate for someone to pay attention to them.

## 4. Attitude

We tend to be judgmental rather than open to those around us we don't know. Often, we don't view people the way God views them. In Luke 15, Jesus paints a clear picture of God's heart for each of us. In three separate stories he describes something that is greatly missed—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son—and someone who desperately wants to find them again. What if our attitude toward those who are “missing” reflected this picture of the heart of God?

**4 DISCUSS** :: Which barrier to paying attention do you struggle with the most? What can you do this week to try to overcome that?

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**5 PRACTICE** :: Choose a facilitator to guide you through this practice. Everyone else, close your eyes.

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How well have you paid attention to those around you right now? Without peeking, think about the following questions:

Who is sitting on your right? And on your left? Even if you don't know their names, describe them silently. (What are they wearing? What color hair do they have?)

How well have you paid attention to nonverbal cues of those around you?

For the person on your right and on your left, what have you noticed about their:

- Eye contact: Were they making eye contact? If so, was it more intense than usual?
- Facial expression: What was their face showing? (Filled with interest; unexpressive; suggesting doubt?)
- Tone of voice: Was their voice projecting warmth, confidence, and interest; was it strained and blocked?
- Posture and gesture: Were their bodies relaxed; stiff and immobile? Were their shoulders tense and raised; slightly sloped?
- Intensity: Did they seem flat, cool, and disinterested; over-the-top and melodramatic?
- Timing and pace: Was there an easy flow of information back and forth? Did nonverbal responses come too quickly or too slowly?
- Sounds: Did you hear wordless audible indications of caring or concern; disgust; nervousness; happiness?

From what you've noticed, how would you describe their outlook on life today? Are they upbeat? Somber? Determined?

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Open your eyes. Did this practice represent your normal “noticing skills”? Why or why not?

How well do you think that you pay attention to the people around you? Explain.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Commit to starting a new spiritual discipline by agreeing to spend 30 seconds each day paying attention to people in your ordinary routine and being unusually curious about them. Keep a journal about the people you paid attention to and things you observed about them.

Partner with someone else in the group and share your observations by phone, email, or in person at least once per week between meetings.

Also, share with each other anything that you have noticed happening inside of you as you have been paying attention to others. Make sure to encourage and celebrate every attempt!

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Paying attention is a simple practice that can have a big impact on you and others. It can change you and cause you to see others, yourself, and even God differently. Without intentionality, barriers will frequently interfere with your ability to pay attention to the people around you.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Evangelism Without Additives* by Jim Henderson (Waterbrook Press)
- *God Space* by Doug Pollock (Group Publishing Inc.)
- *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* by Dan Kimball (Zondervan)

## QPlace STORY

Kristin went out for lunch with her family after church one Sunday. Everyone was busy talking and eating when her three-year-old daughter whispered to her, “That little girl over there lost her family.” Everyone looked over at a girl of about seven years of age who was crying. It appeared she was alone and standing by the door. Kristin walked over to the young girl and asked her what was wrong. The girl said she couldn’t find her family and she thought that they left the restaurant without her. Upon bringing the little girl over to her table, Kristin learned that her name was Audrey and that indeed her family was nowhere to be seen in the small restaurant or in the parking lot outside.

The caring attention of Kristin and her family helped Audrey stop crying. She became calm enough to recall her mom’s cell phone number. Kristin was able to contact Audrey’s parents who thought that she had gone in the other car with her aunt and uncle. It turned out that the aunt and uncle thought Audrey was going with her parents. They were so thankful that someone had taken care of their daughter through this embarrassing and frightening situation. It took a three-year-old to notice that something was wrong, and because she was paying attention to what was going on around her, God used her to help parents reconnect with their young daughter.



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# WHAT IS SECRET PRAYER?

## the **big** idea

When you secretly pray for people around you, you join God’s work in their lives, preparing them to be drawn closer to him.

### **ice breaker**

Have you ever prayed for someone without them knowing? If so, what motivated you? What did you pray for?

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### **related Scripture**

*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.* Romans 8:26-27 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*We must learn to find the backdoor into people’s hearts because the front door is heavily guarded.*  
– Ravi Zacharias

## SECRET PRAYER IS NOTICING’S FIRST ACTION

Like the other main practices in the Art of Noticing (paying attention and genuine listening), secret prayer is a subtle strategy that is rarely considered valuable in the modern evangelistic economy. In the ancient military classic *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu, in a stroke of counterintuitive genius, instructs his troops, “When you are near, make them think you are far away.” Traditional evangelistic approaches sometimes overpower those we are trying to reach with information and logical arguments—the equivalent of a military frontal assault. What if those who want to spread God’s good news did something counterintuitive and subtle too, like the ancient war hero?

In this post-Christian era we simply cannot count exclusively on the power of religious reasoning or arguments to bring people into a growing relationship with Christ. People don’t want to be conquered or even convinced. They want people in their lives whom they can trust and who will

show acceptance and love to them. At the outset, they are interested in conversation and connection, not conversion. As author and teacher Ravi Zacharias says, “We must learn to find the backdoor into people’s hearts because the front door is heavily guarded.”<sup>1</sup> Yet even though people distance themselves quickly from religious persuasiveness, we can pray fervently for God to work closely with them and open the way for life-transforming conversations.

**1 DISCUSS ::** As far as you know, what part did someone’s behind-the-scenes prayers play in your coming to know Jesus?

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Doug Pollock in *God Space* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing Inc., 2009), 23.

## SECRET PRAYER HELPS YOU SEE WHERE GOD IS AT WORK

Discovering God and coming to faith in Jesus involves a process, not just an event. John Finney, the author of *Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen?*, reports “that most people experience faith through relationships, that they encounter the gospel through a community of faith, that becoming a Christian involves a process that takes time.”<sup>2</sup> It’s a process that depends on God’s transforming action in a person’s life.

Secret prayer can be the first step of engagement in what God is up to, so that you can recognize where God is at work and join him. In his book *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby explains, “When Jesus passed through a crowd, he always looked for where the Father was at work.... [God’s] desire is to get us from where we are to where he is working. When God reveals to you where he is working, that becomes his invitation to join him. When God reveals his work to you, that is his timing for you to begin to respond to him.”<sup>3</sup>

**2 DISCUSS ::** How do you recognize when God is up to something in people’s lives around you? How can prayer raise your awareness of God’s activity?

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## SECRET PRAYER PREPARES YOU

You could call secret prayer “praying behind people’s backs.” Nobody but God knows you’re praying. It’s a covert operation. Be discreet. Don’t stare, but just send up a silent prayer while you are in the vicinity of someone you have noticed. Don’t close your eyes. Don’t move your lips. Just pray for them as you see them. Pray that they would sense the presence of God in some undeniable way. Pray for their day. Pray for their peace. Pray for their relationships. It doesn’t have to be a long prayer, either. Just a quick one will do. You could also call this “unauthorized” prayer because you are not asking people for permission to pray for them. Though they know nothing about it, it counts with God.

Jesus, of course, is our model for this practice because he seemed to have a “thing” for praying in secret:

*But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6:6 (NIV)*

Once you are secretly praying for someone, God begins to change your heart toward that person. Secret prayer prepares you to cooperate with God as he seeks out the lost sheep in our world. It invites you into this search.

**3 DISCUSS ::** What experience have you had in which God changed your perception of someone as you prayed for that person?

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This secret prayer approach provides an opportunity for Christians—whether talkative or quiet, outgoing or shy, silly or serious—to participate and to experience God more. When you practice this, you will likely notice an increase in divine “coincidences.”

Secret prayer is easy and likely something you have already been doing without realizing how much it mattered. Here are some examples:

- When driving to work one morning, Jim encountered road construction. A woman was directing traffic at a four-way stop and she seemed a bit frazzled. Jim prayed for her safety and for her anxiety to be lifted. On his way home, he noticed that she had moved to another location and was very helpful in directing him. She also had a big smile on her face.
- On his way to drop off his son, Curtis would often see an elderly man buying a newspaper near the school. One day he decided to pray for this man. Since then, every time he sees him, he prays and gives him a friendly nod.
- Cheryl loves to browse through the country furnishings store near her home. When she first discovered the store, she noticed that the store owners, a young married couple, were hard-working and had

<sup>2</sup> John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen?*, as referenced by George G. Hunter, III in *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Henry T. Blackaby & Claude V. King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 55, 70.

a gift for decorating. Now, every time Cheryl walks through the store, she prays for the owners—that God would bless their business and reveal himself to them.

The truth is that we don't know what impact our secret prayer may have on a person. But, as Blackaby notes, we do know the truth that "God is always at work around you. God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal, and God invites you to become involved with him in his work."

The most challenging part of secret prayer is our willingness to surrender the outcome to him. By releasing control of the results, we submit to God's will and align our hearts with his plans for the people around us. This secret prayer practice does something to you—it impacts the way you look at yourself, others, and God.

**4 DISCUSS ::** What do you think the people described above might have experienced by secretly praying?

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How could secret prayer impact the way you view yourself?

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Others?

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God?

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In studying a work of art, we are taught to pay careful attention to specific elements in order to appreciate and understand the piece. The longer you observe the art work, the more you see. Similarly, secret prayer deepens your observations of people around you.

Here are some creative examples of how you can simply pray for people you've noticed (each of these prayers would take less than five seconds).

- God, this person seems to be going somewhere in a hurry. Please protect him and give him peace.
- Lord, she seems very anxious. Grant her a sense of your presence in this moment.
- Father, this person seems overwhelmed. I pray that a sense of your love and presence would lessen his load.
- God, I believe you are using all the pieces of this person's life to draw him to you. Thank you for loving him enough to do whatever it takes to bring him into your presence.
- Lord, I pray for this couple's marriage and any children they might have. I pray that they would often find you in their midst today.
- God, may she find you to be sufficient in her struggles today.
- Father, I don't know what's going on inside him, but you do. I pray for your joy to overwhelm him today in some undeniable way.
- Lord, may you have your way with this person, and with me, today and forever.

**5 PRACTICE ::** For this exercise, sit facing everyone in the group, eyes open, without saying anything. Discreetly pick one person to pay attention to. As you observe that person, make mental notes and pray based on your observations.

Feel free to modify this practice to fit your group size. After the exercise, share what you observed and prayed for.

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Commit to spending 30 seconds paying attention to and secretly praying for people near you each day. Write down your observations and secret prayers and be prepared to share your experiences at the next session.

Here are a couple of secret prayer ideas to consider:

- Penny Prayer: Every time you see a penny, use it as a reminder to pray for someone you noticed during the week.
- TV Prayer: The next time a commercial comes on while watching TV, push the mute button and pray for someone you noticed today.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

By asking God to work in people around you and letting the Spirit of God lead you, you can discover how secret prayer moves you toward people and moves people toward Jesus.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West . . . Again* by George Hunter (Abingdon Press)
- *Evangelism Without Additives* by Jim Henderson (Waterbrook Press)
- *Jim and Casper Go to Church* by Jim Henderson and Matt Casper (Tyndale House Publishers)
- *Reimagining Evangelism* by Rick Richardson (InterVarsity Press)
- *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons (Baker Publishing Group)

## QPlace STORY

As a young mom, Sharon liked to walk with her three children around a nearby lake. Hundreds of other people walked there every day. Having become disenchanted with traditional evangelism approaches, she wasn't planning to "witness" to her fellow walkers. However, she did want to do something to engage in what God might be up to in their lives. So rather than feel guilty for not witnessing, she got busy praying for people behind their backs. Without their permission, she asked God to get personally involved in the lives of those walking all around her.

Once Sharon began paying attention and secretly praying for those people walking around the lake, her heart began to warm for them. Now, with her children, she exercises the spiritual practice of praying behind people's backs. This practice has opened her children's eyes and her own to see the other walkers as people who matter to God. And now those people also matter to Sharon and her children.



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# ARE WE GENUINELY LISTENING?

## the **big** idea

When you genuinely listen to someone, you lay the foundation for authentic conversations, because listening communicates that you are interested and that you care.

### **ice breaker**

Describe the last time someone really listened to you. How did it make you feel?

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### **related Scripture**

*But Jesus kept looking around to see who had [touched his clothes]. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”* Mark 5:32-34 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable.*  
– David Augsburger

## JESUS MODELED GENUINE LISTENING

Imagine the scene in Mark 5:21-34 as if it were a Hollywood movie. Jesus arrives in town and is swarmed by a crowd. Jairus, an important community leader, rushes up to Jesus and begs him to come heal his young daughter, who is dying. As Jesus sets out, the people press in on all sides.

In the midst of this urgent moment, a sub-plot emerges: the hemorrhaging woman in the crowd. This Jewish woman has endured over a decade of social isolation because of her illness. She has spent everything she had on painful, ineffective treatments, and now she casts all her faith on Jesus, in simply touching his cloak. She reaches out. Suddenly Jesus stops and asks, “Who touched me?”

Luke’s Gospel reports that Jesus feels power going out of him. He looks around to see who touched him. Mark’s account says that the woman came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth.

Here is the amazing part. Despite the important assignment Jesus was on, he stopped and listened to her. His care for her went beyond her physical healing, and he took time to hear her story, to listen to “the whole truth” about her. That was genuine listening.

 **DISCUSS ::** What do you think it meant to this woman to be able to tell her story to Jesus?

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## EVANGELIZING WITH YOUR EARS

There's great value in genuinely listening to others. In today's church culture, Christians often don't realize that listening can be just as powerfully "evangelistic" as telling people about God. People experience Jesus' love and care when we listen to them. As we listen, we also gain more insight into who they are, and where they're coming from. Genuine listening can be challenging because it requires self-control. But self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. We need to rely on the Holy Spirit to help us keep our mouths closed and ears open. It also takes practice and intentionality to be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19).

When you've already noticed someone by paying attention and secretly praying for them, listening is a natural next step. Here is a surprisingly simple way to genuinely listen to someone: just look them in the eye, hold the look, lean in a little, and say, "How are you?" . . . then keep quiet. Be genuinely interested in hearing their story—the truth of what is going on for them right now. Don't correct, preach, talk over, or editorialize. Don't offer your own opinions. Just listen to theirs. You could call this "evangelizing with your ears." If you will genuinely listen to someone this way, they will almost always tell you how they really are.

**2 PRACTICE ::** Pair up with another person. Take turns following the "How are you?" model given in the previous paragraph.

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After you each have a turn, share how the practice felt to you. What went well? What would you do differently?

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## GENUINE LISTENING IN ACTION

Here are a few keys to genuine listening:

### 1. Ask questions

It helps to be a little curious about people. Try to ask open-ended questions that require more than a one-word answer. ("What do you do?" or "What do you think?" are good examples.) Ask for people's opinion without giving your own. Ask clarifying questions, but refrain from trying to control the outcome or steer the conversation, and see what happens.

### 2. Stay focused

Try not to let your eyes wander while someone is talking to you. That's a pretty clear signal to most people that you're done listening. It costs you time away from your own agenda to stay focused on someone else, even for a few minutes. But this cost is really an investment in a relationship. It's worth it!

### 3. Say "wow" a lot.

When you really begin to listen to people, they will tell you things that may shock or stun you. People become extraordinarily open with you when they sense that you're really paying attention. Use a couple of phrases liberally as they are sharing: Say "wow" a lot, or "That's really interesting." This helps you deal with your own shock or awe in the moment without having to hijack the conversation. Doing this lets the other person continue without being worried that they have offended you in some way.

Like the other Art of Noticing practices (paying attention and praying secretly), this practice does something to you. You don't need a lot of skill or bravery. You also don't have to hunt someone down. Wherever you are, you can pay attention to people, pray for them, and then listen. You will find yourself caring about people all around you whom you haven't even noticed before. You may find yourself caring about people you normally don't even like.

**3 PRACTICE ::** Practice genuine listening with topics that generate differing opinions.

- Pair up with someone you don't know very well.
- Pick a hot topic—something that generates strong opinions. Here are some examples: gun control, distracted driving, alternative medicine, or a political viewpoint.
- Each person takes a turn (three minutes each) to express an opinion about their chosen topic.
- One is the talker, one is the listener. Switch roles after three minutes.
- Practice listening without expressing your own opinion or making any editorial comments.
- Pay attention. Say "wow" a lot. Ask open-ended questions.

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Debrief together on your experience and the challenge of listening to other people's opinions.

The Art of Noticing by genuine listening has a way of nibbling into someone’s heart and seems to be an approach that needs no resistance. What happens when you genuinely listen to someone?

- You take your eyes off yourself for a moment and focus your attention on someone else. This is a surprisingly rare thing.
- You become aware of God’s presence and activity and begin to connect with what he is up to in people all around you.
- People around you in your normal routines of life begin to really matter to you—even people you wouldn’t naturally like.
- You throw open the doors of possibility to connect in authentic conversation with someone.

4. Don’t editorialize when they answer. You can ask brief clarifying questions, but let them give their opinion without imposing yours.
5. Thank them for their time and let them get back to whatever they were doing. If they ask you what this is for, tell them you’re just really interested in what people in our culture think about Christians and spiritual topics. The point is to listen and value their opinions. This is rarely done by Christians.

Don’t use this as a tool to get people to listen to your pitch. Move on. Surprise them by not having a hidden agenda! If they want to talk more, they’ll tell you. Don’t be shocked if this creates an opportunity to continue the conversation. If so, set up a more convenient time to talk with them later.

**4 DISCUSS ::** What is one way that you can integrate genuine listening into your existing relationships and everyday routines?

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**60-Second Survey**

1. **What is the difference between spirituality and religion?**
2. **Which spiritual person do you most admire?**
3. **What would you say to Christians if they would listen?**
4. **Has anyone ever tried to “save” you?**

**THE 60-SECOND SURVEY**

A fun way to practice genuine listening is the 60-Second Survey. Just four questions are asked and responded to in 60 seconds. Here’s how it works:

1. Ask someone if you could do a quick survey with no strings attached. This shouldn’t be the first thing you say to someone, but a natural extension of a respectful interaction. Make sure you aren’t imposing on anyone by doing the survey.
2. Tell them it will take about 60 seconds.
3. Ask the four questions in rapid succession and don’t react to the answers. Hold to 60 seconds; you need to keep it moving. This is an integrity issue.

**5 PRACTICE ::** Pair up with a partner and take 60 seconds each to do the 60-Second Survey with each other. Make it fun.

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After you’ve both given the survey, talk about how it felt to give and receive the survey.

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

- Do the 60-Second Survey once this week with someone. Shortly afterward, write down the person's answers and journal the experience.
- Try the "Free Attention Giveaway." This week intentionally approach someone and ask this question: "How's it going?" When they answer, listen well and ask clarifying questions. Don't interrupt with your own story.

Partner with someone else in the group and share (by phone, email, or in person) how your experience went, how you felt, and what you learned. Make sure to encourage and celebrate every attempt!

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Genuine listening is a powerful and often overlooked aspect of evangelism. It opens the possibility of entering into an authentic conversation in which we allow God to control the outcome.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Evangelism Without Additives* by Jim Henderson (Waterbrook Press)
- *God Space* by Doug Pollock (Group Publishing Inc.)
- *Jim and Casper Go to Church* by Jim Henderson and Matt Casper (Tyndale House Publishers)
- *Reimagining Evangelism* by Rick Richardson (InterVarsity Press)
- *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons (Baker Publishing Group)

## QPlace STORY

One day in a restaurant, Jerome and his friend asked Katy, their waitress, if she had 60 seconds to answer four questions with no strings attached. Here's how Katy answered:

1. **What's the difference between spirituality and religion?**  
*Religion is about rules; spirituality is personal.*
2. **Which spiritual person do you most admire?**  
*Dalai Lama and Mother Teresa.*
3. **What would you say to Christians if you thought they would listen? Practice what you preach.**
4. **Has anyone ever tried to "save" you?**  
*Yes, one of my closest friends.*

Here's how Jerome responded: "Thanks, Katy. That was really helpful." A few minutes later Katy returned to refill their coffee and

asked, "What are you guys into?"

"We're just trying to figure out what people think about Christian stuff," Jerome responded.

"Why?" Katy asked.

"Well, we want to help Christians learn how not to be jerks," at which point she laughed with that knowing laugh, and said, "Yeah, that would be helpful." After several more visits, Katy emailed Jerome to tell him that he would be proud of her because she had started reading the Bible. Jerome is sure that if he had tried to share the gospel with Katie in that first restaurant visit, she would have politely pretended to listen and then gladly moved on. But the approach of genuinely listening to her has sparked sincere, enduring interest.



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# The Art of Praying

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**2.1 WHY PRAY FIRST?**

**2.2 HOW CAN PRAYER MOVE PEOPLE?**

**2.3 HOW CAN IT BE PERSONAL & PURPOSEFUL?**

**2.4 HOW CAN WE ASK GOD ABOUT PEOPLE?**





# WHY PRAY FIRST?

## the **big** idea

Prayer to God makes sharing about God effective.

### ice breaker

Are you inclined to pray for people who God has put in your life before you talk to them about faith matters? Why or why not?

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### related Scripture

*“No one can come to me [Jesus] unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me.”* John 6:44-45 (NIV)

### challenging wisdom

*Sometimes we think that if we know just the right words [to say] the person will believe.... The Bible awakens us to a reality that we sometimes forget.... Satan is alive and well.... We forget our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, the principalities of darkness in the heavenly realms. There is no issue or area in your life where you are most in the fray against forces you can't see than when you are doing evangelism.... Unless we engage our witness [about Jesus] with spiritual weapons, we are doomed to fail.*

– Lon Allison

## PRAYER DEMONSTRATES OUR DEPENDENCE ON GOD

In his book *Why Pray?*, international ministry leader John DeVries tells a story about his six-year-old grandson Andrew visiting his other grandparents, Nanna and Poppa Dykstra, in Nova Scotia. Andrew spent a week “helping” Poppa on the dairy farm, riding on the tractor in Poppa’s lap. DeVries reflects on the memory:

Since then I have often thought of little Andrew on Poppa’s lap as they lumbered off on the tractor to do some field work. This image strikes me as a picture of myself in prayer.

Prayer is the dependent relationship in which I sit on the lap of my heavenly Father and put my hand on his as he steers the tractor. After all, he not only owns and drives the tractor, but he owns the farm! . . . The fields that are ripe for harvest are God’s. He owns the tractor, and he knows where to plow. Only when we, like little children, climb into God’s lap in prayer, feel his arms of love around us,

and experience the security of having our hands on his while he guides the steering wheel—only then will missions move!<sup>1</sup>

**1 DISCUSS ::** Why do you think we commonly forget to pray before talking with someone about God?

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We can often have an inflated view of our role in the process of someone coming to know Jesus. But the truth is that only God can do the saving. Jesus helps calibrate our perspective in John 6:

*“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me.”* John 6:44-45 (NIV)

As a result, we are faced with the humbling reality that we cannot save anyone. We cannot convict or convince anyone. This is not our role, as Jesus reveals:

*“And when [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God’s righteousness, and of the coming judgment. . . . When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.”* John 16:8, 13 (NLT)

Our job is to pray. God invites us to participate with him in his redemptive activity in the world through prayer. It has been said that “when people work, people work; when people pray, God works.”

**2 DISCUSS ::** What has been your perspective on the role of prayer in sharing your faith? How have you lived out your perspective in real life?

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We must also depend on God because our own strength is insufficient to combat our adversary. We cannot forget that we have an adversary in this spiritual battle for the hearts, minds, and souls of our friends and neighbors. Yet, God invites us into his arms in prayer. God is the source of all the power needed and he alone can defeat our enemy and rescue a human heart. As Scottish minister and teacher Oswald Chambers wrote, “The prayer of the feeblest saint who lives in the Spirit and keeps right with God is a terror to Satan. The very powers of darkness are paralyzed by prayer. . . . No wonder Satan tries to keep our minds fussy in active work till we cannot think in prayer.” We cannot fight our adversary with our own strength. We need the weapon of prayer.

*For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. . . . Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.*  
Ephesians 6:12, 18 (NLT)

**3 DISCUSS ::** What evidence have you seen of a spiritual adversary who opposes efforts to talk with people about God?

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## PRAYER SOFTENS HARD HEARTS

In the early 1980s, Lon Allison, pastor, speaker, and teacher of evangelism, planted his first church in a movie theater in California. This was not just any movie theater, but an X-rated movie theater. On the first Sunday, the theater marquee read: “Now Showing—God XXX.” People came. God miraculously changed lives there. In the mid ’80s, God led Lon to start another church nearby but in a different socioeconomic community. There wasn’t an X-rated movie theater in that community, but there was a movie theater, so they rented it. By this time, Lon had a seminary degree and worked even harder to plan and prepare. Hardly anyone came.

During this disappointing time, while driving through the fertile agricultural region of the San Joaquin Valley, Lon was contemplating the ineffectiveness of his second church plant and lamenting to God over how hard it was to evangelize people in this second community. Then something remarkable happened.

God gave Lon a vision of a giant hand hovering above the fields, holding a huge, rock-hard clod of dirt. Lon understood from God that this impenetrable soil was the place into which they were trying to plant a new church. A hammer . . . a fist . . . nothing could break the dirt. As Lon was contemplating this metaphor, rain began to fall down upon it. The gentle pouring of continual rain started loosening up the unbreakable clod. Afterward, upon telling some close friends about this experience, one of them said with conviction, “The rain is prayer. The rain that breaks hardened hearts is the prayers of God’s people.”

**4 DISCUSS ::** Think of a person you know who seems unlikely to follow Christ. What is it about that person that seems resistant to God?

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## PRAYER DRAWS PEOPLE TO JESUS

Prayer is like the gentle pouring of rain that loosens up the hardness of the hearts of our coworkers, neighbors, friends, classmates, and family. Author and speaker Rick Richardson states it this way: “Before we can talk to people about God, we need to talk to God about people.”<sup>2</sup> By beginning our evangelism with prayer, we lead with dependence on God

and love for those we pray for. Evangelistic prayer gives the responsibility of “saving” to God. We submit to God’s plan for our seeking friends and agree to “show up,” willing to be used for God’s purpose in their lives.

John DeVries recounts a story from India about the power of prayer to draw people to Jesus:

In one tribal out-caste village, many families became Christians and they became concerned for the salvation of the high-caste Brahmins living on the other side of the river... and so the families began to pray.

Stephen was a wealthy Brahmin living on the other side of the river. His wife had been ill for twenty years. . . .

One evening Stephen’s wife told him she had heard there were many miracles happening in the village [across the river]. She suggested that he go and stand by the river, facing the hut of the untouchables, to pray to this “new” God for healing.

At first he objected . . . but she prevailed and he went, asking this unknown God to reveal himself by healing his wife. If that would happen, he said, they would serve him forever. He returned to his home, and to his amazement he found his wife totally healed. In great excitement they rushed over the bridge and did what no self-respecting Brahmins would ever do—they entered the home of the untouchables and demanded to know who this God was to whom they had prayed.

The untouchables told them about Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Prayer is powerful because the God to whom we pray is all-powerful and lovingly draws people to Christ—even the most unlikely men and women. As Lon Allison says, “It is the prayers of God’s people that break down the strongholds that the enemy holds over the people in our lives who do not know God.”<sup>4</sup> When we become aware of prayer’s evangelistic power, we are motivated to pray to the only one who can change a person’s condition—God.

**5 DISCUSS ::** For whom do you most long to come to know Jesus? Share their names with the group. How do you think prayer could soften their hearts and draw them to Jesus?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**6 PRACTICE ::** In pairs or triads, pray a simple prayer for someone you know. Feel free to use one of the following examples to get started. Fill in the blanks with the name of your friend.

- Lord, it seems like \_\_\_\_\_ is blind to your truth. If this is true, please pierce \_\_\_\_\_’s blindness with your light so that he/she sees who you are and welcomes you into his/her life. (2 Corinthians 4:4)
- Father, gently instruct \_\_\_\_\_ to recognize if he/she needs to turn from lies that hold him/her back from you. Help \_\_\_\_\_ to come to his/her senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken \_\_\_\_\_ captive to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:25-26)
- God, you alone judge our hearts. Help \_\_\_\_\_ turn his/her heart to you and believe in your Son. Convict and convince him/her, Holy Spirit, so \_\_\_\_\_ believes in Jesus wholeheartedly and experiences your acceptance. (John 3:18)
- O God, \_\_\_\_\_ seems to be walking on the wide road away from you. God, turn his/her heart and give him/her the courage to choose the narrow gate. (Matthew 7:13)
- Heavenly Father, it seems \_\_\_\_\_ is separated from Christ, excluded from relationship with you and your hope. Have mercy and soften \_\_\_\_\_’s heart to move toward you and to be included in Christ. (Ephesians 2:12)

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Discuss how this exercise gives you confidence that God will answer your prayers.

**7 DISCUSS ::** In your life, how has prayer, or the lack of it, had an effect on the fruitfulness of your efforts to introduce people to Jesus? From now on, what simple steps can you take to invite God’s activity into their lives?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

For 10-15 minutes one day this week, “practice” praying for others to come to know Jesus. Start first with people you know well. Write their names down and pray for them. Then pray for people whom you come across in your daily activities, even if you don’t know them well yet.

Here are some ideas for those prayers:

- *God, give the grocery checker an extra boost of energy today and may he have the joy of knowing you.*
- *Father, give my neighbor your peace today; help her find you in her difficult situation.*
- *God, I pray that you will lighten the load of my coworker and that he will discover that you stand ready to carry his burdens.*
- *Lord, I pray that \_\_\_\_\_ will come to know you. Create a spiritual climate around her that will point her to you.*

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

We are dependent on God to work in people’s lives and prepare them to receive the gospel. Without his work, our efforts are fruitless.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Prayer, Does It Make Any Difference?* by Philip Yancey (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan)
- *Praying Effectively for the Lost* by Lee E. Thomas (John the Baptist Printing Ministry)
- *Reckless Abandon: A Modern-Day Gospel Pioneer’s Exploits Among the Most Difficult to Reach Peoples* by David Sitton (Ambassador International)
- *Why Pray?* by John DeVries (Mission India)

## QPlace STORY

Pat and his wife were taking a special vacation, so they ordered a limousine ride to the airport. As Pat settled into the back seat, he noticed a *Biblical Archaeology* magazine tucked into the back pocket of the front seat. Out of curiosity, Pat asked the driver, “Are you a Christian?” A bit put off, the driver responded, “Why would you ask me a question like that?” Pat directed his attention to the magazine. The driver replied that he was simply interested in archeology and was, in fact, of Jewish heritage.

Pat viewed the moment as a divine appointment and entered into a spiritual discussion with the driver. Within the course of their conversation, Pat was able to naturally share the gospel. As they

arrived at the airport, Pat told the driver, Michael, that he believed God had plans for him, and that he would pray for him.

Pat did pray for Michael—for years.

Who would have suspected that seven years later Pat would once again settle into the back seat of a limousine and spot a *Biblical Archaeology* magazine inside? Before they had left the driveway, Pat asked the driver if his name was Michael. Surprised, the driver said, “Yes, how did you know that?” Pat reminded him of their encounter seven years earlier. And then Michael became excited. In those years, as Pat had been praying, God had worked in Michael’s life . . . and he was now a follower of Jesus!



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4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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# HOW CAN PRAYER MOVE PEOPLE?

## the **big** idea

In humble dependence, we can ask God to move in the lives of our spiritually lost friends, and he will answer those prayers.

## **ice breaker**

Who is a famous person you would like to see become a Christian? To what extent do you believe praying for that person would make a difference? Explain your answer.

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## **related Scripture**

*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”* Matthew 9:36-38 (NIV)

## **challenging wisdom**

*God will make us pray before He blesses our labors in order that we may constantly learn afresh that we depend on God for everything. And then, when God permits us to see conversions, we shall not be tempted to ascribe them to our own gifts, or skill, or wisdom, or persuasiveness, but to His work alone, and so we shall know whom we ought to thank for them.*

– J. I. Packer

## MOVED TO PRAY

Even though we may try desperately, our own efforts can do very little to shift the hearts of unbelievers toward God. There is at least one thing, however, that does make a difference: God’s activity prompted by our prayers. We may not be able to explain the mechanics of how it works, but we know from Jesus’ words that our prayers are honored by God, and used by God.

Our motivation—*why* we pray—may very well be as important as *what* we pray. How effective will our requests be if they come from a place of pride, obligation, or contempt? When praying for spiritual movement in people’s lives, we must remember that the object of our prayers is a real person—not a project. As our hearts line up with God’s heart, and we start praying in accordance with what matters most to him, our God-honoring prayers move both the people we pray for, and us—the people around them who can help.

French theologian John Calvin explained:

Our prayer must not be self-centered. It must arise not only because we feel our own need as a burden we must lay upon God, but also because we are so bound up in love for our fellow men that we feel their need as acutely as our own. To make intercession for men is the most powerful and practical way in which we can express our love for them.<sup>1</sup>

**1 DISCUSS ::** Do you tend to pray for people who are far from God because you want to or because you think you should? Explain your response.

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Perhaps we do not pray for nonbelievers with greater focus or frequency because it seems too simple. Or, maybe

we are convinced that other outreach tools and techniques are more persuasive. We may even be “practical prayer atheists”—professing believers in the value of praying but unbelievers in practice. However, when it comes to loving people toward Jesus, prayer is not optional. It is the primary way we will shift from relying on our strength to God’s power in our spiritual engagements, and the means by which our efforts actually become spiritually effective.

Richard Foster, in *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, speaks about the practice of “Intercessory Prayer” and how it flows first from a spirit of genuine humility and compassion. He says, “If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer.”<sup>2</sup> When we realize that we cannot provide non-Christians with what they really need on our own, prayer will surface as our only viable alternative.

**2 DISCUSS ::** When you pray, what interferes with actually believing that God can answer your prayer to change the minds and hearts of those you are praying for?

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Just before Jesus sent his disciples out on their first ministry adventure, he modeled for them the significant (and seemingly endless) work of proclaiming God’s good news from town to town. And when he came face to face with the masses of people who were experiencing life without hope, his heart broke for them.

*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* Matthew 9:36 (NIV)

Jesus’ concern for the people was not simply a quick glance at a pitiful situation. Love compelled Jesus in everything he did. In this instance, he was affected in an even more profound way. He knew the crowd’s plight and their fate, and it moved him to the core of his being. Jesus knew these spiritually wayward people needed someone who would love them with both grace and truth, someone who would lead them well and protect them from spiritual harm, someone who would bring them eternal hope and healing—the very thing he left heaven and came to earth to do. Christ’s compassion got the attention of his followers who were preparing to head into Kingdom ministry.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Describe a time when you were moved to pray for an unbelieving family member, friend, or stranger. What caused you to start praying?

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If you have stopped or gotten discouraged in your prayers, what is getting in the way?

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What can revitalize your prayer for them?

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### MOVED TO GET GOD’S GOOD NEWS OUT

With a heart that was deeply moved, Jesus looked at all the people who were still separated from the Father, and he commanded his followers to invest their hearts—not just their time and talents—to pray for more Kingdom workers:

*“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”* Matthew 9:37-38 (NIV)

This was probably not the first thing on the minds of the disciples, but praying for workers was important to Jesus; they—and we today—need to do as he asked, and pray.

**4 DISCUSS ::** What would it look like for you to pray for workers for the harvest? Think about how this focus could apply personally, professionally, nationally, and globally.

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We must not forget that prayer moves believers and non-believers alike. According to Jesus, when we pray, people are stirred to get God’s good news out—not just receive it. Granted, our simple thoughts about it don’t magically move people into ministry. Rather it is God at work in whatever manner he deems appropriate, and by his sovereign decree,

we participate with him in that work as we talk to him in prayer. Given that we are commanded to pray, a correlation surely exists between our prayers and God's increased movement in and around us. We don't have to know how it works—we just need to step into the assurance that it does.

R. A. Torrey, an American pastor, evangelist, and educator in the late 19th/early 20th century, held revival services in nearly every part of the English-speaking world. He wrote:

The most important human factor in effective evangelism is prayer. Every great awakening in the history of the Church from the time of the Apostles until today has been the result of prayer. There have been great awakenings without much preaching, and there have been great awakenings with absolutely no organization, but there has never been a true awakening without much prayer.<sup>3</sup>

God moves in response to our words; something shifts in the hearts of people and changes occur in this world when we go to the Lord of the harvest in prayer. We know that God uses his message-bearers to bring the good news of Christ to the spiritually lost (Romans 10:13-15). And, just as Paul requested prayer so he could clearly communicate the gospel (Ephesians 6:19), we know that partnering with God and others is critical for effectiveness in our circles of influence. As a priority in our prayer for unbelievers, we would be wise to place the request that the Lord send others to assist. We are all invited into the adventure of praying for his message and messengers to get out into the world.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Name two or three people God sent into your life who helped you come to faith. How would your spiritual story be different had they not responded to God's call to be a message-bearer?

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## MOVED TO BEING SENT

In Matthew, have you ever noticed that Jesus is standing with harvest workers when he challenges them to pray to the Lord to send out those folks? His disciples were just about ready to go out on an important mission, and here Christ is telling them to pray for even more workers to be sent out. They are both evangelistic pray-ers and workers.

Your spiritual journey would be quite different if God had

not allowed you to cross paths with certain individuals; the same is true of the impact you may have on someone else's journey. God's desire is that you will be open to being used by him in the lives of those who still don't know him. You might be the answer to someone else's request for a worker to be available! When we pray that the Lord will send people out on his behalf, it should not be all that surprising that this includes us too!

**6 DISCUSS ::** When you consider that you might be the answer to someone else's prayer for a Kingdom worker, how do you feel? What activity in your life may indicate that God is at work through you in this way?

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Without question, God-honoring prayer moves people. The Lord desires to release evangelistic resources into the world, and prayer stirs believers to respond to the call of God's Spirit leading them out. It leads unbelievers to hear God's Word clearly and receive the gospel openly. And, it challenges us to humbly and compassionately bring people who are far away from God right into his throne room.

**7 PRACTICE ::** A great starting point for prayer is to find an area of spiritual harvest that moves you to Christ-like compassion. Spend a few moments reflecting on groups of people to whom you want God to send workers. For example:

- your unbelieving family members, friends, and neighbors
- people you work with, go to school with, do business with, or play sports with
- people-groups identified by ethnicity, socio-economic status, disabilities, or life-stage

List several specific "harvest fields."

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Share at least one area that stirs you to pray. Take turns praying that God will send workers to reach the spiritual harvest in the areas you each identified.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Take the list of “harvest fields” that you generated in the practice within this module and continue to pray every day for those people and for a spiritual harvest in the area that you identified. Journal your prayer experience.

At the next meeting, be prepared to share with each other anything that you have noticed happening inside of you as you have been praying. Make sure to encourage each other and celebrate every attempt!

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

When we pray out of trust in God and hearts filled with compassion for people who are far away from him, God moves people and opens the way for the harvest to be reached.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* by J. I. Packer (InterVarsity Press)
- *The Hour that Changes the World* by Dick Eastman (Baker)
- “The Place of Prayer in Evangelism” commentary essay in *The Fundamentals* by R. A. Torrey (Baker)
- “Prayer” (Chapter 3) in *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster (HarperCollins)

## QPlace STORY

In third grade, Jim decided to follow Jesus. Though the relational gap between him and his father widened, Jim was committed to sharing the reality of God’s grace with him. He invited his dad to church, shared Bible stories and songs he was learning, and asked him to come to his baptism. Many times as he grew up, Jim openly talked with his father about his relationship with God. After moving out of state, he wrote his thoughts down in a letter, hoping that the ability to re-read the words might make a difference. He had learned a few time-tested apologetic arguments, and when his father did not respond by trusting Christ, he presumed his ability to communicate them effectively was lacking.

As a growing believer, Jim knew the importance of prayer, so he prayed for his dad to become open to faith in God. Yet even then there hadn’t been much apparent spiritual movement in his dad. Then Jim began to pray for the “spiritual harvest” area surrounding his father. He

thought, *What if I pray for my step-mom, brother, and sister?—they all interact with Dad. What if I include my dad’s co-workers, neighbors, friends, and extended family?*

To Jim’s surprise, within six months his father’s closest coworker became a follower of Christ. Within a year, two neighbor families identified themselves as believers and another Christian family moved in next door. Within two more years, Jim’s sister and several of his father’s friends decided to trust in Jesus.

Though Jim’s dad hasn’t yet come to Christ, they have grown closer through Jim’s consistent walk with God, his genuine love and compassion, and an ever-widening circle of Christ-followers surrounding his dad. Jim believes it will only be a matter of time before his father makes the decision to follow Jesus for himself. He’s still praying because of what he has experienced first-hand: prayer moves people!



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# HOW CAN PRAYER BE PERSONAL & PURPOSEFUL?

## the **big** idea

Intentionally praying for people who are exploring faith is critical to their choosing to follow Jesus.

## ice breaker

Has anyone ever told you they were praying for you? How did you respond—what impact did it have on you?

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## related Scripture

*My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* John 17:20-21 (NIV)

## challenging wisdom

*When we pray for others we do not stand with outstretched hands hoping to receive something for ourselves. We stand at God's side, working together with Him, in the task of redeeming others.*

– Edward Bauman

## MAKING PRAYER PERSONAL

Nineteenth-century evangelist George Müller was a godly man known for his tenacious practice of purposeful prayer. It was his belief that prayer could influence people toward true faith in Christ, and his life evidenced this conviction. He prayed faithfully, he prayed daily, and he prayed by name for unbelievers.

In the book *George Müller: Man of Faith and Miracles*, author Basil Miller recounts George Müller's experience praying for five not-yet Christians in his life:

In November 1844, I began to pray for the conversion of five individuals. I prayed every day without a single intermission, whether sick or in health, on the land or on the sea, and whatever the pressure of my engagements might be. Eighteen months elapsed before the first of the five was converted. I thanked God and prayed on for the others. Five years elapsed, and then the second was converted. I thanked God for the second, and prayed on for the other three. Day by day I continued to pray for them, and six years passed before the third

was converted. I thanked God for the three and went on praying for the other two.<sup>1</sup>

In an interview near the end of his life, Müller was asked how much time he had spent in prayer for the last two unsaved people on his five-person list. He humbly and earnestly responded, "I have been praying every day for fifty-two years for two men, sons of a friend of my youth. They are not converted yet, but they will be! How can it be otherwise?" Shortly after the death of George Müller in 1898, the two young men for whom he had prayed over half a century turned to God. It is hard to overemphasize the power of praying intentionally for specific individuals.

**1 DISCUSS ::** On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = least; 10 = most), how important to you is praying for unbelievers you know by name, and why?

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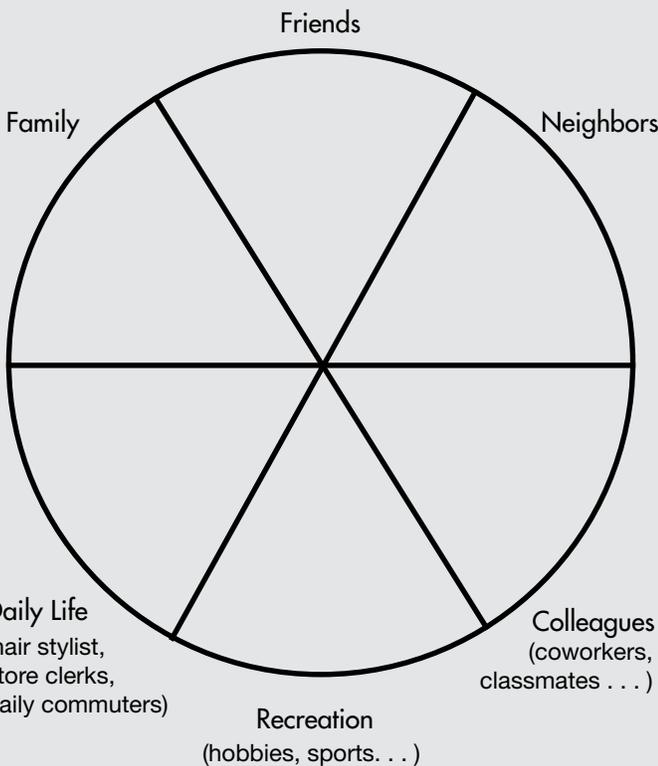
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In Luke 22, Jesus tells Simon Peter that he has prayed specifically for him:

*“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”* Luke 22:31-32 (NIV)

How meaningful, purposeful, and powerful that specific prayer was to be in Peter’s life! In the same way, when we pray specifically and personally, our prayers become purposeful. Our hearts are engaged in a way that doesn’t happen when we pray for lost folks in general. When we pray more specifically for the circumstances pertinent to the person we care about, we can see God’s work step-by-step instead of just in general ways. Individuals also begin to matter to us in a deeper way, and the details of their lives become more important. In praying for them by name, with concern for their circumstances, we go beyond generic prayers to genuine, compassionate, heart-felt intercession.

**2 PRACTICE ::** In at least three categories of the circle below, write down specific names of people you know who likely do not have a relationship with Jesus.



### MAKING PRAYER PURPOSEFUL

When we begin to pray specifically for individuals to come to know Jesus, we start to pray with purpose, and on purpose. Our thoughts become clear and our words get more intentional. Emotions infuse our words as we identify and express our deepest desires for those we care about. Our attitudes and motives get exposed by God’s Spirit—both those that are good and those that are off track. Ultimately, something shifts inside us and the Lord is able to align our hearts with his.

When we pray by name and with purpose for unbelieving family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and classmates, our interactions with them also become more deliberate and meaningful. Our interest and investment in their lives grow. We begin to wonder about their family and friends, their dreams and desires, and their movement toward or away from spiritual matters. Our specific focus before God opens us up to being more compassionate for the sake of Christ and those people.

**3 DISCUSS ::** What are some specific requests that you can pray for the people you listed in the circle in #2?

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What, if anything, would hold you back from praying purposefully for each of these people?

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In John 17, Jesus prays in a pointed and purposeful way. He first prays for his immediate circle of followers who are within earshot, for their future protection and unity. Then he widens the circle of prayer to include everyone who would eventually turn to God through him for salvation (John 17:20). He prays with purpose for their unity and faith, both for their own sake and the sake of a watching world that would know and see God through the transformation in them.

As Jesus faced the cross, the deepest, most passionate prayer of his heart was wrapped up in those who would one day believe in him. When we intercede for people who have

not yet come to trust in Jesus, we are not only opening our hearts in a new way to those people, we are also drawing close to the deepest desire of God’s heart—and to God himself.

**4 DISCUSS ::** If you began to pray with more purpose for the people you named in the circle, what kinds of changes do you think would be likely to take place in you?

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As we seek to pray more and more purposefully for those we know who are exploring matters of faith and a relationship with God, we can look to Scripture for specific guidance:

- **Pray for openness to know the truth**  
(2 Corinthians 4:4-6; 1 Timothy 2:3-5)  
Ask God to shine his light in people’s hearts so they will come to recognize the truth.
- **Pray for receptivity to God’s grace**  
(Romans 3:23-24; Titus 3:4-7)  
Salvation is a free gift, but it must be received to be experienced. There are likely unbelievers you know who are full of pride or feel unforgivable. Pray they will come to recognize God’s greatness and goodness, his unconditional love and forgiveness that completely takes care of our sins and failures.
- **Pray for heartfelt conviction of sin**  
(John 16:8-11; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5)  
The Holy Spirit takes responsibility for uncovering and convicting people of their imperfection in relationship to God. You can pray specifically that unbelievers you know will pay attention to the work of God’s Spirit as he points out where sin exists in their minds, words, and actions.
- **Pray for genuine steps of repentance**  
(2 Corinthians 7:10)  
You can pray specifically for spiritual seekers you know to humbly turn toward God—and away from the destructive clutches of sin—as God faithfully draws them to himself. Pray for them to feel the life-giving

conviction brought by the Spirit, rather than the crushing self-loathing that comes from guilt and shame incited by the enemy.

- **Pray for deep spiritual roots in Christ**

(John 15:5; Colossians 2:6-7)

When a person you care about is on the edge of becoming a follower of Christ, pray that the decision will be reinforced by complete surrender and stable faith. Pray specifically for their love of God to be nurtured by engaging in his Word, in prayer, and in relationships with other believers.

- **Pray for God’s love to be clearly experienced**

(1 John 4:7-10, 19-21)

Pray that people you know will feel the need to give and receive sincere love, and that they would clearly experience the love of God in a way that will help them believe and trust in Jesus.

## MAKING PRAYER A PRIORITY

Once we intentionally make prayer for unbelievers personal and purposeful, the next step is to make prayer a priority. Our best intentions to go to God on behalf of unbelievers will only take us so far. We must be diligent in carving out dedicated space and time to actually pray in a targeted way. Setting aside regular times in our schedules, keeping a running list of specific unbelievers to pray for, and being diligent to keep “prayer appointments” with God are critical steps. It is a definitive choice for each of us to make prayer a priority and to use this powerful weapon that God provides and invites us to use.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Share with your group the name of one unbeliever and how you are committed to praying with purpose for him or her between now and the next time your group meets. Spend a few minutes praying for each person in the group and the unbelievers mentioned.

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Set a challenging but attainable goal to pray at a consistent time for specific not-yet Christians. (For example, 3 at 3: Pray for three individuals each day at 3:00 p.m.) Write down their names, your relationship, and one or two ways you plan to pray with purpose for them. (Example: “Jeff—colleague; Openness to know the truth as he watches his son, a new believer; Sincere love for his wife as they face marriage problems—and seeing the need for God’s help.” Share your list with at least one person who can encourage, pray alongside, and check in with you.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

If we pray intentionally for those who do not know Jesus, making our prayers personal, purposeful, and a priority, we will be ministering to them in the most profound way,

because God himself will be at work in them to bring them to himself.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *George Müller: Man of Faith and Miracles* by Basil Miller (Bethany House)
- *Intercessory Prayer* by Edward Bauman (Westminster Press)
- *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* by J. I. Packer (InterVarsity Press)
- “Prayer” (Chapter 3) in *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster (HarperCollins)
- “Intercessory Prayer” (Chapter 17) in *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* by Richard Foster (HarperOne)
- “The Place of Prayer in Evangelism,” a commentary essay in *The Fundamentals* by R. A. Torrey (Baker)

## QPlace STORY

Nicole was Paula’s hairdresser. Paula often prayed by name for people she encountered, and so she began praying for Nicole. As often happens at the hair salon, conversations began and stories were told. Paula was fascinated to hear how Nicole and her husband had adopted a son from Russia, and little by little they shared more of their lives with each other.

One day Nicole gave Paula some devastating news. Her husband had asked for a divorce, announcing that he was gay. Nicole now had two boys to raise as a single mom. Stunned, Paula told Nicole that she would pray for her. In fact, she and her husband, Steven, started praying together that Nicole would find the help she needed in Jesus.

For years, they prayed. One Christmas, Paula gave Nicole a Bible. Opportunities began to open up in their relationship for Paula to share her own story and her faith in Jesus. When Paula invited Nicole to

church, she came with her sons, felt welcomed, and began to settle in. Paula and Steven prayed that Nicole would clearly experience God’s love and recognize her need of Jesus. Soon God opened the way for deeper, ongoing spiritual conversations with Nicole, no longer bound by the limits of the hair salon. Yet, Nicole still did not understand their answers to her questions about the gospel.

One Sunday at church there was an announcement about an upcoming baptism. Paula kept praying. And then, early on the morning of the baptism, Nicole was awakened at 3:00 a.m. Unable to get back to sleep, she began to pray. As she prayed, she had a vision of herself—being baptized! God had shown her that she was ready to receive this Jesus and be baptized in his name—ten years after the time that Paula first sat in Nicole’s chair.



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Wheaton, IL 60187

**Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.**

# HOW CAN WE ASK GOD ABOUT PEOPLE?

## the big idea

When we ask God a few simple questions about people, we can participate in his work as he draws them to himself.

## ice breaker

If you were a reporter assigned to interview God about an unbelieving friend in your life, what would you ask him? How do you think he would answer?

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## related Scripture

*You have searched me, LORD,  
and you know me.  
You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.  
You discern my going out  
and my lying down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.*  
Psalm 139:1-3 (NIV)

## challenging wisdom

*We feel like “this is how I want to help a person toward God—challenge them, ask their story.” And that’s all good stuff, but often it is kind of canned and scripted and it doesn’t ask the more fundamental question: “God, where are you at work in this person already?” I think that’s actually the most important evangelism question you can ask.*  
– Rick Richardson

## WATCH WHERE GOD IS AT WORK

For two years, Pastor Henry Blackaby and students from his church in Saskatoon, Canada, attempted to start a Bible study ministry on a nearby college campus. And then one day Blackaby challenged his students just to watch for where God was working and join him.

I told our students, “If someone starts asking you spiritual questions, whatever else you have planned, don’t do it. Cancel what you are doing. Go with that individual and look to see what God is doing there.” . . . On Wednesday one of the girls reported, “Oh, Pastor, a girl who has been in classes with me for two years came to me after class today. She said, ‘I think you might be a Christian. I need to talk to you.’ I remembered what you said. I had a class, but I missed it. We went to the cafeteria to talk. She said, ‘Eleven of us girls in the dorm have been studying

the Bible, and none of us are Christians. Do you know somebody who can lead us in a Bible study?” As a result of that contact, we started three Bible study groups in the women’s dorms and two in the men’s dorm. For almost two years we tried to do something for God and failed. For three days we looked to see where God was working and joined him. What a difference that made!<sup>1</sup>

Most of us think evangelism is mostly about sharing—verbally sharing our story or God’s story. We have friends or neighbors who are disinterested in God, skeptical of Christianity, or apathetic to spiritual things, and we want to tell them about God or his impact in our lives.

But what if that is not where it starts? What if God has already initiated pursuit of your friends and simply invites you to join him? Rick Richardson, author of *Evangelism Outside the Box* and evangelism professor at Wheaton

College, notes, “Collaborating with God and what he is doing in another life is the evangelism strategy. Because he is the witness. He is the one bringing people forward. He is the one interacting with people’s pain. So asking God good questions about people is, I think, the first task in evangelism.”<sup>2</sup>

**1 DISCUSS ::** What might be exciting about joining in where God is already at work in the life of someone you know who doesn’t know Jesus? What could be scary about it?

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To understand what God is doing in others’ lives and what our role might be, we need to ask him. As a start, there are three key questions:

**First, ask God, “Where are you already at work?”** God may already be moving in the people around you, even if they don’t realize it. And even if you don’t see the evidence of his activity, he may already be using their pain, joy, fear, or confusion to woo them to himself. It’s important to be watching and ready to respond as God leads.

In Acts 9, God gave Ananias the startling instruction to go and meet Saul, the most zealous persecutor of Christians. God had already taken action in Saul’s life; yet he gave Ananias the opportunity to participate in the healing, transformation, and welcoming into fellowship of the one God would use to offer salvation to the Gentiles!

Throughout Scripture, God involves people in his activity. Henry Blackaby and Claude King point this out in their book *Experiencing God*, noting that Jesus always looked to God the Father to see what he was up to.

The first thing Jesus recognized is that his Father was always at his work. God did not create the world and then just leave it to run all by itself. He is not just sitting in some heavenly place passively observing all the activity on earth. God is orchestrating history. He is present in the middle of all history. God is the One who is at work redeeming a lost world. His desire is to involve his people and his servants. . . . Because of his love he wants us to have the privilege of working with him as his ambassadors.<sup>3</sup>

As we follow Jesus’ example, we will watch for God’s

invitation to join him in the spiritual drama unfolding in the lives of others, to collaborate with him in bringing people to himself. When we ask him where he is already working, we get to reach out to others *with* God, not just *for* God.

**2 DISCUSS ::** How natural is it for you to ask God to show you where he’s already at work in someone’s life?

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When have you recognized God at work, and how did you know?

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## JOIN GOD’S WORK IN PROGRESS

**Secondly, ask God, “What does this person need right now?”**

Not only does God know exactly what he’s up to in each person, he knows each person’s heart, and exactly what they need at this very moment. Psalm 139 communicates this truth:

*You have searched me, LORD,  
and you know me.  
You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.  
You discern my going out and my lying down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.  
Before a word is on my tongue  
you, LORD, know it completely.  
You hem me in behind and before,  
and you lay your hand upon me.*

Psalm 139:1-5, NIV

So often we come to a person who doesn’t know God with our well-rehearsed scripts and arguments. And while God certainly uses our words at times, he also uses our service, our prayers, our blessing. For example, for a person who is grieving the recent loss of a relationship or a job, being reasoned or argued with isn’t going to be very effective.

Rick Richardson learned this at a secular arts festival some years ago. He explains:

I’ve long said that Christians are a very rationally

dependent culture, and we think that our words are what gets the thing done. I did the same thing at that festival, praying, “God, give me the killer argument to get through to these experientially oriented, self-at-the-center people.” And I felt like God said to me, “Why don’t you just let me show up? It is not words, it is my power that moves people.”<sup>4</sup>

When Rick began praying for the people in attendance, he saw a fresh openness toward God that his pre-planned words never would have accomplished.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Have you ever experienced God leading you to pray in a very specific way or to do something unique for a person who doesn’t know Jesus? What was that like?

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### THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

**Finally, ask God, “How can I invite this person to experience Jesus in a fresh way?”** We tend to invite people to experience God in ways that can be a bit clichéd. We invite them to a church service. We tell them he meets all their needs. We say God is always with us and gives us joy. But it’s too easy for people to dismiss our attempts as uninspired: “That’s nice for you.” For people who haven’t grown up in the church, who haven’t experienced these truths—and even for those who have—it can all sound phony or trite.

Let’s be honest, many people’s stereotypes about Christians, church, and God aren’t very positive. Many have been burned by the church. Many have been hurt by Christians. Many have based their understanding of God on his most zealous bullhorns, yelling about his love (or judgment) on the evening news, street corner, or college campus. So when we use stale approaches, terms, and concepts, it brings to mind these negative ideas.

A slew of recent books with telling titles—*Quitting Church* by Julia Duin, *Leaving Church* by Barbara Brown Taylor, *They Love Jesus but Hate the Church* by Dan Kimball—speaks to the negative connotations many people associate with our invitation to a church or traditional Bible study. For people with a negative religious background, or none at all, we need to get creative to communicate the very real, wondrously life-changing truths about Jesus. Many

of these people are skeptical about our words and need to experience God’s love and grace in action.

In addition, we’re all wired by God differently, and therefore we will experience and respond to him in a variety of different ways. In his book *God Is Closer Than You Think*, Pastor John Ortberg writes:

He is the One who made us, and he made us to be wildly, wonderfully, absurdly different from each other. Thinkers and feelers, back-slappers and wannabe hermits, race horses and turtles—“the Lord God made them all.” Yet all too often we fail to realize that our individual uniqueness means we will all experience God’s presence and learn to relate to him in different ways, in ways that correspond to the wiring patterns he himself created in us.<sup>5</sup>

Our Creator, who knows each person’s baggage and wiring, can show us how to introduce his Son to those who need to meet him. This is the God who used a burning bush and a talking donkey to get people’s attention. He knows how to win people’s hearts. Doesn’t it make sense to ask?

**4 DISCUSS ::** Have you experienced God in a unique way? What did that experience teach you about him? And what did it mean to you?

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**5 DISCUSS ::** Using the three suggested questions, pause now and pray alone or in pairs about the people you are trying to help discover Jesus. Practice listening for his insight and leading, and jot down or share whatever he might say to you.

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If you sensed any prompting from God just now, were you surprised by any insights he gave you? How do you intend to cooperate with God and act on that prompting?

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<sup>4</sup> Rick Richardson, Q Place Vital Conference presentation, September 25, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> John Ortberg, *God Is Closer Than You Think* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 111.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Over the next week, commit at least ten minutes each day to asking God these three questions about someone in your life you're trying to reach for him. Make sure to spend most of this time listening for God's answers and leading. In a journal, write down what you hear, and ask God to help you know how to act on these insights.

1. Where are you already at work?
2. What does this person need right now?
3. How can I invite this person to experience Jesus in a fresh way?

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

The adventure of evangelism is discovering where God is at work and joining him on his mission to reconcile people to himself. Since he is already at work all around us, we can ask him to show us where he wants us to participate in his activity of love and grace.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Evangelism Outside the Box* by Rick Richardson (InterVarsity Press)
- *Experiencing God* by Henry T. Blackaby & Claude V. King (Broadman & Holman Publishers)

## QPlace STORY

At a youth group camp, the gospel had been presented and the kids had been sent out for a retreat of silence so that they could hear from God themselves. The camp counselors waited in the chapel, praying that Jesus would reveal himself to these students.

The students knew that they could come back if they needed prayer. As Jeff, a camp counselor, sat there praying, a sophomore student came up and said that something was blocking his way to accepting this Jesus, but he didn't know what.

Jeff gathered a group in a circle around him and they laid their hands on the student and began to pray. Jeff silently asked God to reveal what stood in this young man's way.

That's when a picture came to Jeff's mind—a picture of this boy

sitting in a dark place trying to climb to the light. There was also a brown wooden door with three yellow glass windows.

When the prayer finished, Jeff asked the student if a brown wooden door with three yellow glass windows meant anything to him. He said, "That's my bedroom door in my cottage in northern Michigan. I sat next to that door sobbing after my grandparents were killed in a car accident." And then he added as he began to cry, "And I am so mad at God for not letting me say goodbye to them. We were real close."

Clearly, that was the barrier. With this deep anguish out in the open, the young man was ready to ask God for help even when he couldn't understand why God allowed the tragedy to happen. Finally he could receive this Jesus who he so desperately wanted.



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# The Art of Listening

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**3.1 WHY LISTEN?**

**3.2 WHY DON'T WE REALLY LISTEN?**

**3.3 WHAT IS LISTENING?**

**3.4 HOW CAN WE REALLY LISTEN?**





# WHY LISTEN?

## the **big** idea

Listening communicates God’s love to people in profoundly real ways and opens up opportunities for connection.

### ice breaker

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone who was not listening to you? How did you know? How did you feel?

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### related **Scripture**

*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.* James 1:19 (NIV)

### challenging **wisdom**

*I’m willing to bet the farm that in our postmodern Christian society the most important evangelistic skill is listening.*

– Todd Hunter

*Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because Christians are talking where they should be listening.*

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer

## LISTENING COMMUNICATES LOVE

In 1816, a young French physician named René Laennec fashioned a cylinder from a sheet of paper and used it to examine a patient. He discovered that internal sounds could be isolated and amplified through a tube, making examinations less intrusive and easier to interpret. This exciting discovery paved the way for the modern-day version of the stethoscope. Doctors use this instrument daily because they’ve learned that listening well is a powerful tool for healing.

Relationally, listening is equally as powerful for connecting people. People in our culture often interpret listening as love. Listening calls for an attitude of humility and grace. We surrender our desire to be heard and understood in the interest of understanding the other person. Author Sue Patton Thoele sums it up well: “Deep listening is miraculous for both listener and speaker. When someone receives us with open-hearted, non-judging, intensely

interested listening, our spirits expand.”<sup>1</sup> When we make an effort to move toward the people who cross our path and listen to them, relationships are formed and deepened. Being known as a good listener will cause you to stand out in our self-centered, what’s-in-it-for-me kind of world.

When we demonstrate that we are truly seeking to understand people and not change their points of view, we create a safe environment for them to open up at a deeper level. As they feel genuinely understood, they also begin to better understand themselves. Poet and cartoonist Shel Silverstein observed that “Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.”<sup>2</sup>

In a society full of people who would rather talk than listen, people are starved for someone who is willing to move into their life as a listener and learner.

**1 DISCUSS ::** What might be exciting about joining in where God is already at work in the life of someone you know who doesn't know Jesus? What could be scary about it?

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## LISTENING REVEALS GOD'S HEART FOR PEOPLE

Historically, much of the evangelistic training Christians have been exposed to has said very little about the art of listening. Far too many Christ followers have been taught to give gospel presentations rather than to engage in spiritual conversations. These well-intentioned, agenda-driven monologues have left many people with a negative impression of Christianity, sending the message that we think “our religion is better than your religion, so listen to us while we tell you why we're right and you're wrong.”

### ASSESS

Take some time to evaluate the following statements, using a scale of 10 – 1, where 10 = always and 1 = never.

#### When others are talking to me . . .

- I find myself finishing their sentences.
- I give my opinions before hearing them out.
- I get restless and impatient.
- I lose track of what is being said.
- I mentally rehearse what I'm going to say next.
- I take control of the conversation.
- I interrupt with frequent comments or questions.
- I try to diagnose and help them fix their problems.
- I worry about what I'm going to say next.
- I answer before gaining real understanding.

Based on this assessment, which elements of listening would you like to improve? Why?

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When we approach people with the intent of telling them what we know, yet don't really try to understand where they're coming from, they will put up defenses. Then, we often find ourselves looking for clever responses that will somehow change their mind to our way of thinking. The interaction can easily turn negative. A better approach is to remember the counsel of James 1:19-20 (NIV): *My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*

The simple practice of listening to people allows us to understand and to identify common ground. It makes us open-hearted and outwardly focused. As Doug Pollock, author of *God Space*, explains, “Listening communicates true humility and sends this powerful message: ‘I accept and respect you.’”<sup>3</sup>

In fact, listening reflects the attitude of Jesus. In Philippians 2:5-8, the apostle Paul reveals the profound truth that while Jesus was God himself, knowing all things, he didn't use that to his own advantage. He emptied himself and became like us. In his pursuit of people, Jesus gave us the ultimate example of humility and self-sacrifice. When we take the initiative to listen to people around us in our everyday lives, seeking to understand them rather than to explain ourselves, we reflect the humility, self-sacrifice, and genuine care of Jesus. And in reflecting Jesus, we are revealing the heart of God.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Would those who know you well call you a good listener? Why or why not?

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## LISTENING ENABLES US TO UNDERSTAND

It is possible that we have the wrong impression of listening. Listening is anything but sitting around nodding and murmuring, “Uh-huh, uh-huh” again and again in complete passivity. As Pollock clarifies, listening is “a sensitive but assertive quest really to understand someone else. It requires you to probe, explore, and reflect back what you've been hearing to ensure that you've truly understood what's been revealed to you.”<sup>4</sup> It seeks to discover people's stories, to learn what interests them, and ultimately to discover where God is at work in their lives. Listening creates “God space”

by helping others feel safe in our presence. This frees others to share their struggles, their doubts, and even their beliefs about God. As noted by author Ram Charan, “[Active] listening opens the door to truly connecting and is the gateway to building relationships.”<sup>5</sup>

In most conversations, how long does it normally take before you dominate the discussion with your worldview? If you want to increase the quality and the quantity of your spiritual conversations, challenge yourself to put the spotlight on the other person. *You* become the listener and the learner. The quality of your listening skills powerfully affects your potential to build trust, engage conversationally, and establish relational credibility.

In every conversation you have the opportunity to demonstrate that you’ve been listening well. If you don’t take that opportunity, the conversation is likely to die out. A clear way to assure someone that you have heard them is to reflect back what you thought you heard them say. As you seek to understand people better through your listening, it is wise to begin with a humble, tentative opening followed by a brief paraphrase of the feelings and ideas you thought you heard.

Here are some example phrases to help you demonstrate that you have heard and are seeking to understand.<sup>6</sup>

- So, if I’m hearing you right...
- Let me make sure I’m tracking with you. You’re...
- You’re saying you feel... Is that right?
- Wow! You’re really...
- What you really want me to grasp is that...
- It’s like... Does that capture it?
- So what ticks you off the most is...
- So what excites you most is...
- So the really big thing for you is...
- Do you mind if we take a quick time out so that I can replay what I thought I heard you say?
- You seem to be saying...
- I think I hear you saying...
- It sounds like...

**3 PRACTICE ::** Pair up with a partner. Designate who will share (S) first and who will listen (L) first.

- S: Take 2 minutes and share a challenge you’re facing right now in your life’s journey.
- L: Reflect back what you heard using one of the reflective listening phrases provided or one that you come up with.
- S: Affirm your partner when he/she connects with what you are saying. Graciously let L know if he/she is missing the essence of what you are trying to say and give him/her another chance.
- L: Keep working at it until S feels heard.

Switch roles.

After you have finished the exercise, gather back together in your group. Share what it felt like to be listened to.

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Discuss the challenges you faced in your attempts to listen to each other.

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Brainstorm the many reasons why listening is so important.

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Discuss what you think might happen if Christ-followers regularly showed up eager to listen.

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**4 PRACTICE ::** Take turns replaying a spiritual conversation you had in which the results ended up less than desirable. As a group, brainstorm reflective listening phrases that might have helped to keep the conversation going, with the spotlight on the sharer/speaker.

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<sup>5</sup> Ram Charan, *Harvard Business Review*, HBR Blog Network, “The Discipline of Listening,” 6/21/12.

<sup>6</sup> Phrases are taken from Doug Pollock’s *God Space* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing Inc., 2009), 60-61. Used by permission.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

This week, ask an unchurched friend or acquaintance this question: “I’ve been wondering if you’ve ever met anyone or experienced anything that made God seem real to you?”

Listen intently to their response. Reflect back to them what you believe they said and ask if you have heard them correctly. The goal is to understand them. Practice listening without expressing your own opinion or making any editorial comments. Don’t interrupt or hijack the conversation or try to explain their experience. Ensure that your facial expressions and body language also do not express judgment or your own opinion.

Journal about your experience. Be sure to write down the person’s response shortly after the conversation. Partner with someone else in the group and share (by phone, email, or in person) how your experience went, how you felt, and what you learned. Be sure to celebrate every attempt!

## QPlace STORY

A couple of years ago, Doug found out just how powerful it is to listen when he asked a young man named Victor this question: “If I gave you 30 minutes to speak to a group of Christians on what not to do to have a spiritual conversation with you, what would you tell them?” Victor responded without hesitation, “I’d tell them if you are not willing to listen to me, I am not going to listen to you.” He continued, “Every conversation I’ve ever had with Christians has been so one-sided. They want to do all the talking and expect me to do all the listening.”

Doug reflected back on what he thought he’d heard Victor say. “It sounds like your conversations with Christians have left you very frustrated because they never want to listen to you. Am I hearing you correctly?” Victor replied, “Absolutely, and it ticks me off because it’s quite obvious all they are concerned with is getting their point

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

When we really listen to people, we express God’s love and our love and respect for them. As listeners and learners, we show our willingness to understand them and value their perspectives.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Steven Covey (Simon & Schuster)
- *Finding Common Ground* by Tim Downs (Moody Publishing)
- *God Space* by Doug Pollock (Group Publishing Inc.)
- *How Will They Hear If We Don’t Listen?* by Ronald Johnson (Broadman & Holman)
- *Listening for Heaven’s Sake* by Anne Clippard, Dave Ping, & Gary Sweeten (Equipping Ministries International)
- [www.EquippingMinistries.org](http://www.EquippingMinistries.org)

across. It comes across as very arrogant and disrespectful. I end up wanting nothing to do with their religion because I would never want to become like them.”

Doug affirmed Victor for his passionate and authentic response and then asked him a follow-up question. “I’m wondering if you have ever had a positive spiritual conversation with a Christian, and if so, what made it different?” He quickly responded, “I’ve only ever had one and it was because this Christian actually listened to me and asked me questions about what I believe.” Doug asked him to clarify why this conversation stood out as the only positive encounter he had ever had with a Christian. His response was very insightful. “Because when he listened to me, I could tell he really cared about me.”



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# WHY DON'T WE REALLY LISTEN?

## the **big** idea

We should assume we are not good listeners—because it's usually true.

### **ice breaker**

How can you tell if someone is a good listener? What do they do or not do?

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### **related Scripture**

*Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied to Job:*

*“Will you be patient and let me say a word?*

*For who could keep from speaking out? . . .*

*Doesn't your reverence for God give you confidence?*

*Doesn't your life of integrity give you hope?”*

Job 4:1-2, 6 (NLT)

### **challenging wisdom**

*The art of listening isn't difficult to master. And when you have, new worlds open up. It's exciting.... Learning to listen is a blast. It makes us fuller, smarter, more empathetic. . . .*

– Meghan Biro

## **WE TEND TO DISLIKE WHAT'S UNRESOLVED**

The earliest Jesuit missionaries made it a point to enter new locations and not speak for six months. Instead, they listened. These missionaries recognized the importance of understanding where the other people were before attempting anything else.<sup>1</sup> That's intense and determined listening!

Each of us enters into a new relationship, workplace, neighborhood, or dorm as a missionary for Jesus Christ. For us, remaining completely silent for the first six months is undoubtedly not the most helpful approach, but the point is that many of us feel uncomfortable with silence, ambiguity, or doubt. We are especially uneasy about unanswered spiritual truth. We were “trained” to give solutions as we received praise or admiration for the right answers—whether they were math problems in the classroom, Scripture verses in Sunday school, or defense of biblical truth in public discourse. However, a good listener can handle unresolved emotion or unanswered questions—leaving them as they

are for the time being.

When we surrender the desire to be an expert and the need to resolve differences immediately, huge barriers to listening will dissolve. This is so important because getting to the best answers usually happens through a process of discovering for yourself—and it requires patience to allow that discovery to unfold for someone else. When we give people space to come to their own answers, to sort it all out in their own minds and at their own speed, the result is worth the wait. We may know the answer; and at times, the urge to tell someone what we're sure would be of help is almost unbearable. But as has been wisely observed: “Often, helpful people . . . aren't.” Sometimes people don't really want your answer; they want a friend. This is an opportunity for each of us to grow in self-control—an underdeveloped quality in our culture and a powerful fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

This is not to imply that you don't engage in conversation. Dialogue is a two-way exchange. However, telling answers is not listening. Telling answers and giving advice often kills

<sup>1</sup> “Listening Facts,” The International Listening Association, <http://www.listen.org/Default.aspx?pagelid=845118>.

dialogue. And telling answers—even right answers—is rarely helpful when we circumvent the very important process of allowing people to discover the truth for themselves.

**1 DISCUSS ::** When we hear someone pronounce their personal philosophy, spiritual questions, or beliefs, we often think: *I have to say something to this person to answer their question or correct that error.* What would you do differently if instead you thought, *I have to listen to this person?* How would your approach change in conversation with people?

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Most of us fixate on what's literal and obvious when we listen; we tend to stay on the surface of what people say. But if we really pay attention as we listen, we may find clues that reveal the deeper questions beneath a person's story.

For example, a person's objections about things like the truth of the Bible or the mystery of pain and suffering may be expressed as philosophical questions. But people rarely think only in terms of theory. If someone questions God's fairness, it's often because something has happened to him or her that feels unfair (though that person may not feel safe enough to share the specifics). Suffering or hurt caused by another Christian can also be behind the question, and the "objections" may be a smoke screen for the real issue, which often takes trust and time to discover. You may have to build the relational equity to earn the right to speak to it.

**2 DISCUSS ::** When someone raises "objections" to Christianity, what is your first reaction: to answer their questions or to ask more questions yourself?

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How could you begin to explore what is going on beneath the surface to find out a person's underlying issues?

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## WE CAN'T GIVE WHAT WE DON'T HAVE

Suppose you're trying to listen to someone who is really wrestling with questions of faith and doubt. If you've never taken the step of questioning your faith or admitting your own doubts, you're more likely to try to get that person to move too quickly to answers, instead of respecting their process.

Not only might you not have an answer for them, you also might not have a good model for processing such questions. If nobody patiently listened to you, it will be hard for you to listen to another. What was done for us, we tend to do for others; what wasn't done for us, we have a hard time doing for others.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Think about your own spiritual growth. What has been your experience with your own questions?

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What messages about doubts (spoken or implied) have you received from others?

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## WE'RE LESS EMPATHETIC THAN WE THINK WE ARE

A good listener is empathetic—but most of us have a hard time getting outside of our own frame of reference. When people express emotion or pain, often our knee-jerk reaction is to want to move them out of it or to fix them. We don't join them where they are; we feel discomfort and want to hurry them to a different emotion or state of being. Rather than following the apostle Paul's admonition to *weep with those who weep* (Romans 12:15), we try to cheer them up—or at least distract them. If a problem is shared, we even may say, "I hear you. I used to struggle with that too. But now I . . ." and we're off telling our story instead of staying with them in theirs. Albert Guinon, the French playwright, put it this way: "There are people who, instead of listening to what is being said to them, are already listening to what they are going to say themselves."

We might be able to feel a flash of pity or even sympathy,

but true empathy enters into a person's pain and questions. Empathy offers comfort, not pat answers, and tries to understand and even experience the other person's feelings. It starts and stays with where the person is, and really tries to understand rather than change, remembering that only God can change a human heart. This can be better understood by looking at the difference between sympathy and empathy; the prefix sym- means "with" ; the prefix em- means "in." As well-meaning and important as sympathy is—being with someone as they feel pain—empathy actually goes beyond that and enters in to the person's feelings and perspective, seeking to understand and care more deeply.

**4 DISCUSS ::** How is your "with" factor (your ability and willingness just to "be with" someone and listen to them)? How is your "in" factor (your ability and willingness to "enter in" to another person's perspective, listen to them, and seek to understand them better)?

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There's an illustration of this dynamic in the story of Job. When Job's tragedies initially crash down on him, his friends come to visit and comfort him. When they arrive, they see firsthand his pain and sit with him in silence for a week (Job 2:13). One might think that was a waste of time. But then Eliphaz from Teman can't take it anymore: "Would you mind if I said something to you? Under the circumstances it's hard to keep quiet" (Job 4:2, *MSG*). After Eliphaz gives Job his advice, they all take turns talking. And virtually everything they say through the rest of the book is a mistake. Their speeches are full of poorly applied theology, explanations, and criticism rather than empathy. At the end of the book, God says that Job—even speaking from his pain—was actually more theologically correct than his well-versed friends who tried to justify God (Job 42:7).

When the friends simply spent time with Job, they actually did the right thing: they came alongside him in his grief and pain. But when they began to speak, it's clear that they didn't really empathize with Job—and they weren't in tune with God either. They wanted to explain God and his "plan," and ended up blathering useless counsel that brought

discouragement and forced Job to defend himself. If we are not willing to listen and truly empathize with someone who is experiencing hardship, pain, or emotion, it's likely that we'll be off track and won't be able to help them discover answers that will really help.

**5 DISCUSS ::** When someone shares struggles or questions, what's your typical response? Use a continuum of "fixer" on one side and "empathizer" on the other. (And just as a gut-check, would a close friend, coworker or your spouse put you there as well?)

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Why do you think most of us are uncomfortable when people share their problems?

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Meghan Biro, entrepreneur and career consultant, brings perspective to the importance of listening: "The art of listening isn't difficult to master. And when you have, new worlds open up. It's exciting. . . . Learning to listen is a blast. It makes us fuller, smarter, more empathetic. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Imagine a world where followers of Jesus are known for being great listeners and learners, with the courage and willingness to engage others. Maybe we are just one listening moment away from a meaningful conversation about God with someone who would never darken the doorway of a church. It's worth listening for, isn't it?

**6 PRACTICE ::** Split up into groups of two or three, with one person communicating a difficult life question or decision, and the others sharing empathy for those struggles and doubts. Simply listen to the situation, do not give answers or advice. Use phrases like "Tell me more about that" or "That sounds difficult" or "How did that make you feel?"

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Discuss what helped the most, and the least, in communicating empathy.

<sup>2</sup> Meghan Biro, "5 Leadership Lessons: Listen, Learn, Lead," *Forbes*, August 4, 2013..

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Notice conversations this week and what people do right after they ask a question. Do they stop and listen? Do they quickly jump back into the conversation? Do they show empathy, or do they appear anxious to say something in reply even if they are silent? Jot down any ideas you get for what it takes to be a better listener. Also, experiment with waiting longer to jump back into a conversation than you normally do. How do people respond to that “space”?

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

It takes humility to admit that our ability to listen may need remedial attention. Too often, we hear, but we do not understand; we think we see the other person's point, but we're fixated on our own. It ultimately comes down to softening our hearts and slowing down our responses in order to give people space to share their unfinished thoughts and unresolved pain.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard* by David Augsburger (Regal Publishers)
- *Quick-to-Listen Leaders* by David Ping and Anne Clippard (Group Publishing)
- *Why Don't We Listen Better? Communicating and Connecting in Relationships* by James C. Petersen (Petersen Publications)

## QPlace STORY

Lee met with a young man who had some questions about faith. He had grown up in a Christian home but recently seemed to have some doubts. At first, the questions were somewhat typical philosophical and intellectual questions: How can a good God allow pain and suffering? What about people of other faiths? Doesn't the Bible have contradictions? And so on.

But during the conversation, Lee noticed that the young man was occasionally quite agitated. He would emphasize certain words, and his body language was somewhat aggressive. Rather than give him quick answers, Lee asked follow-up questions, listened intently, and

tried to discern the man's true story. Finally Lee said, “It seems like you are really angry with God.”

The young man nearly jumped out of his chair in response, “You bet I am!”

Lee was surprised at the intensity of his reaction. He continued to listen and ask probing questions to get at the hurt and anger that was behind this young man's questions. Lee realized that their powerful conversation would never have happened if he had kept the interaction at an intellectual level and not shown curiosity about the deeper story of this young man's life.



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# WHAT IS LISTENING?

## the **big** idea

True listening is giving attention to someone for the purpose of understanding and loving.

### ice breaker

Describe a time you felt someone was truly listening and understanding you. What happened? Who listened? What emotions did “being heard” evoke in you?

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### related **Scripture**

*Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”*  
Mark 4:9 (NIV)

*“Are you listening to this? Really listening?”*  
Mark 4:23 (MSG)

### challenging **wisdom**

*Listening is such a simple act. It requires us to be present, and that takes practice, but we don't have to do anything else. We don't have to advise, or coach, or sound wise. We just have to be willing to sit there and listen.*

– Margaret J. Wheatley

## LISTENING IS TRANSACTIONAL AND RELATIONAL

Wherever you are, whenever you are reading this, you are likely exposed to a whole variety of sounds. Pause for a few seconds and consider this: *What do you hear right now?*

The slight trick in the question is that, by asking you what you were hearing, I prompted your brain to take control of the sensory experience—and made you listen rather than just hear. . . . The difference between the sense of hearing and the skill of listening is attention.

Hearing, in short, is easy. . . . But listening, really listening, is hard when potential distractions are leaping into your ears every fifty-thousandth of a second—and pathways in your brain are just waiting to interrupt your focus. . . . Listening is a skill that we're in danger of losing in a world of digital distraction and information overload.<sup>1</sup>

*Hearing* is when sound vibrations create a physical response inside the ear. *Listening* is a process of communication that requires a person to pay attention to the speaker and provide feedback. It extends much further than hearing. Listening requires concentration, deriving meaning from the

sound that is heard and reacting to it. And, just as hearing is different from listening, transactional listening is also different from relational listening.

*Transactional listening* is one-way communication. As in news broadcasts or a speech, one person is speaking while another is hearing and trying to understand without the opportunity to interact. In this type of listening, we are seeking information and understanding, and accuracy is paramount to us.

*Relational listening* allows for interaction between speaker and listener. The person who is listening can ask questions or repeat back what the person has told them to make sure they've heard it correctly. This kind of listening fosters an exchange of feelings between people, not just comprehension of ideas. In this kind of listening, we are seeking connection, and empathy is paramount.

**1 DISCUSS ::** What is easier for you: transactional or relational listening? Why?

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<sup>1</sup> Seth S. Horowitz, “The Science and Art of Listening,” *New York Times*, November 11, 2012, SR10.

As you listen relationally, you can also listen spiritually. *Spiritual listening* is keeping one ear open to God, asking him to supply us with insights into a person’s situation while we listen. The goal when listening spiritually is not to solve problems or provide answers, but to understand more deeply with both human and Spirit-enabled insight.

In Mark 4, Jesus teaches a crowd gathered along the shore. After he gives them a parable about seeds that were planted in all types of soil, he calls out, “*Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.*” Jesus was inviting them to hear with spiritual ears, to understand and respond to what God was saying to them. Later he meets alone with his twelve closest followers, and he explains more of the parable’s meaning. He concludes with a challenge articulated this way in *The Message* version: “*Are you listening to this? Really listening?*” Jesus wants his followers to listen well to God. When we listen carefully to God and his Word while listening to others, our lives become like fertile soil, and just as in the parable, will result in an abundance of fruit.

**2 DISCUSS ::** If you’ve never engaged in spiritual listening, what do you imagine it would be like? If you have done this, describe one of those experiences.

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How do you think someone who believes differently might respond if you listened with “spiritual ears”?

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## LISTENING IS LETTING GO OF YOUR AGENDA

Alice Fryling wisely warns: “If I want to listen well, with love and awe, I need to let go of my need to be right. I need to let go of many preconceived opinions. I need to let go of my own self-consciousness and insecurities. And I need to let go of the need to appear wise, good, or even spiritual.”<sup>2</sup>

If you want to be a good listener, think of yourself as someone who comes alongside another—not to give advice, but to learn the “real story” of the other person. Sometimes people just want to vent. If you have any doubt if this is of

spiritual value, read the Psalms. Page after page of the Psalms contain outpourings of people’s feelings, complaints, fears, and frustrations to God. If you are uncertain what the person needs from you, simply ask, “Do you want my input, or do you just need to talk this out?” More times than not, people just need to say out loud what’s going on inside them.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Why do you think it is hard for us to refrain from giving advice or from having an agenda when talking with someone?

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Sometimes, people will say that they want advice or help when they really don’t; this will become clear when they react to your counsel with resistance. What they really may need is to figure things out for themselves as they talk. Be patient as people work out their problems internally; there simply are no shortcuts to caring for someone on this level, and it is rarely easy or clear-cut what they need you to do.

In a brilliantly funny video clip a woman tells her husband all about the terrible pain she is experiencing while a nail clearly protrudes right out from the center of her forehead. When he tries to tell her that he really thinks they should pull it out, she snaps back at him, “You always do this! I just want you to listen—not try to fix me!” He’s sure it would make her feel better if they just removed it, but she cries out in exasperation, “It’s not about the nail!” We can empathize with him as he tries to listen to her when such an obvious solution is quite literally staring him in the face.<sup>3</sup>

The video may be a satire about gender differences, or a commentary on people who prefer staying in their pain rather than really getting better. But there is also great value in taking note of how hard it is to see something “obvious” and yet allow a person to work out their own solution at their own pace. As observers, we know the nail is the problem, but if the person doesn’t see it that way, no solution we offer will help. And the truth is, there’s almost always more to someone’s issues than what we see. The video captures how good listening requires us to pass over our impulse to state the obvious (from our point of view) and stay with the person where they are.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Fryling, *The Art of Spiritual Listening: Responding to God’s Voice Amid the Noise of Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2003), 20.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EDhdAHR0g> Accessed September 6, 2013.

**4 DISCUSS ::** Find a partner and discuss a time when you saw something “obvious” in someone else’s life and immediately gave advice. What was the result?

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Revisit each situation, but play out a scenario that might have allowed the other person to work out their own solution at their own pace. What would be different?

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## LISTENING IS LOVE

True listening is an expression of love and kindness, not an attempt to get someone to change their behavior or conform immediately to a certain set of beliefs. Listening is a demonstration of respect that communicates value and worth. When we listen with love, we hear the person’s story without judgment or fear. Relational listening at its best asks, “What does this person need?” rather than “How can I fix this person and get them past this?” or “How can I change this person or their thinking?” Ironically, people are more likely to grow when they can sort out their difficulties in the presence of someone who is committed to them rather than focused on a particular outcome.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Would you equate the word *listening* with the word *love*? Why or why not?

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Jesus told us to love our neighbor as ourselves. When we listen, we are giving the attention that most of us love to receive. Allowing another person to speak, with the goal of understanding their situation and knowing them as a person, is more than simply hearing or comprehending; it also reveals God’s love to them. In fact, it is “being Christ” to that person.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them.” Yet true listening is lacking in our churches, and it is rare in our culture. Listening plays an essential role as we come alongside those seeking God. And in the process, transforms us as well.

**6 PRACTICE ::** This practice needs a volunteer who is facing a decision of some sort. This person will be the “talker.”

Simply listen as this person talks about the decision they are facing. Don’t give advice or ask questions, only listen, pray, and use non-verbal listening skills such as facial expression, body language, etc. You can say things like “Tell me more about that” or “Go on” or offer other encouraging phrases—but don’t interrupt. Give the talker at least five minutes to simply talk.

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Afterwards, debrief:

How did it feel to be the talker?

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What was it like to be one of the listeners?

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What was hard about both roles?

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What did you like about each role?

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Fast from giving advice. Take a set amount of time—a day to a week—and practice conversations with people that completely leave out giving advice. What is it like to listen and participate without offering any of your own suggestions on what they should do? How do they respond to you when you refrain from giving advice?

Journal about your experience. Partner with someone else in the group to share (by phone, email, or in person) how your experience went, how you felt, and what you learned. Be sure to celebrate every attempt!

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Good listening gets the facts right, but more importantly, gets the person you're speaking with right. It is focused outwardly, on the other person; not inwardly, on our

“wisdom” or counsel. It requires not just skill, but patience and love. Good listening seeks to understand the information shared, but more importantly seeks to understand the person sharing.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *The Art of Spiritual Listening* by Alice Fryling (WaterBrook Press)
- *How to Ask Great Questions: Guide Your Group to Discovery with These Proven Techniques* by Karen Lee-Thorp (NavPress)
- *Listen: Finding God in the Story of Your Life* by Keri Wyatt Kent (Josey Bass)
- *Listening for Heaven's Sake* by Anne Clippard, David Ping, and Gary Sweeten (Equipping Ministries International)

## QPlace STORY

Dave and John had just begun to meet regularly with a group of spiritual explorers. One evening during the discussion, a group participant named Eileen raised the “hell” question. “Do people really go to hell if they don’t follow Jesus? That seems awfully harsh for a loving God.” Without asking any further questions or listening for what God might be whispering to them, Dave and John launched into a thorough theological explanation of hell, sin, and eternal damnation. It was all true—but it was a lot. By the end of their hellfire and brimstone lecture, the room was filled with tearful and angry people. The group departed from the apartment that night and Eileen never returned.

A few months later, John and Dave were talking to another group participant named Kathy, who was a friend of Eileen’s. Kathy informed them that Eileen’s father and sister had been killed in a tragic aircraft accident in the previous year and that Eileen had been greatly grieved about their deaths. Immediately, they felt the anguish of this news because they realized that Eileen’s question about hell had other layers of questions below the surface. Dave and John regretted that they had not stopped, sent a prayer up to God, and asked a few more questions to try to understand Eileen’s perspective—instead of giving a homily on hell.



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# HOW CAN WE REALLY LISTEN?

## the **big** idea

High-quality listening is comprised of focus and follow-up skills that can be learned.

### **ice breaker**

Who is one of your favorite TV interviewers? What can you learn about listening by watching a skillful interviewer at work?

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### **related Scripture**

*To answer before listening—that is folly and shame.* Proverbs 18:13 (NIV)

*The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.*  
Proverbs 20:5 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*When you're not listening well, you're not fully present. You miss what's behind the words, the deep truth that's coming from a person. It's not about hearing the words spoken per se; it's about connecting with the heart.*  
– Karen Kimsey-House

*Engaging in a spiritual conversation without listening is like driving a car blindfolded.*  
– Doug Pollock

## MINIMIZE BAD HABITS AND DISTRACTIONS

In the novel *The Art of Racing in the Rain* by Garth Stein, the narrator—a dog named Enzo—wryly observes, “I never deflect the course of the conversation with a comment of my own. People, if you pay attention to them, change the direction of one another’s conversations constantly. . . .” He then gives really wise counsel (especially for a dog!): “Pretend you are a dog like me and listen to other people rather than steal their stories.”<sup>1</sup>

Listening requires putting others first, a mindset of serving that doesn’t come easy for most of us. Philippians 2:3 (NIV) puts it this way: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.*

How can we listen in a way that genuinely puts others first? The good news is that high-quality listening emerges through skills that can be learned and practiced. It begins when we cultivate curiosity about other people, their stories, and their spiritual journeys. And it continues to improve

as we train ourselves to minimize distractions, listen to the other person with our whole self, and ask follow-up questions that lead to greater understanding.

But first it means breaking some bad habits we’ve developed over time. In their book *Listen Up*, Larry Barker and Kittie Watson suggest ten irritating conversational habits:

1. Interrupting the speaker
2. Not looking at the speaker
3. Rushing the speaker and making him feel that he's wasting the listener's time
4. Showing interest in something other than the conversation
5. Getting ahead of the speaker and finishing her thoughts
6. Not responding to the speaker's requests
7. Saying, “Yes, but—” as if the listener has made up his mind
8. Topping the speaker's story with “That reminds me . . .” or “That's nothing, let me tell you about . . .”

9. Forgetting what was talked about previously
10. Asking too many questions about details<sup>2</sup>

**1 DISCUSS ::** Identify which habits listed above are common problems you have when engaging in conversations with others.

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Moving into someone’s life as a listener and learner paves the way for a meaningful conversation. But the noise in our lives can also be a barrier both to speaking thoughtfully and listening attentively. We’re inundated by messages, advertising, emails, texts, and so many other demands for our attention that we learn to tune much of it out. Unfortunately, we sometimes muffle people who matter along with the static.

As reported by the International Listening Association, Watson and Smeltzer researched listening in the workplace and identified these top-three barriers:

1. Environmental distractions such as phones ringing and other people talking
2. Personal and internal distractions, such as hunger, headache, or preoccupation with something else
3. Rebuttal tendency—developing a counter argument while the speaker is still speaking<sup>3</sup>

We face these listening barriers not only in the workplace, but in all of life. Sometimes we try to pay attention, but the “noise”—literally and symbolically—distracts us. One way to increase your capacity to listen is to silence your phone, turn off the television and computer, stop multitasking, and focus solely on the person who is talking with you.

**2 DISCUSS ::** If you’re in a conversation with someone and they answer their phone, how do you feel? Conversely, if someone sits down to talk with you and turns off their phone, how does that make you feel? What specific distractions keep you from listening well?

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## LISTEN TO THE WHOLE PERSON WITH YOUR WHOLE SELF

*Hearing* is an auditory process, but *listening* involves the whole person—mind, heart, and spirit. Start with your body: Are you facing the person, or slouched and half-turned away? What about your face: Are you communicating interest through alert eye contact, or are you looking drowsy or glancing about the room? Are you mirroring the emotional state of the person, staying in sync with them, or are you allowing yourself to drift into a different wavelength? What about your words: Are they few, or are you interjecting lots of your own thoughts or self-referential responses? (Comments such as, “I know! That sounds just like what happened to me!”) If you ask questions, are they relevant, focused on the person (not you), and do you help bring to the person’s attention what you are hearing and observing about them?

Sometimes a person’s actual words can be a barrier to listening. For example, they might say, “I’m fine,” when they really are not. Psychologist Theodore Reik said we listen best when we not only use our sense of hearing, but listen with what he called “the third ear”—paying attention to tone, body language, etc.

Even if the words sound calm, a person can display emotion in other ways. Notice the subtle incongruities between spoken words and underlying messages: clenched teeth, tight hands, or furrowed brows. You might say, “It seems like you felt upset [or sad, or nervous] when that happened, even though you’re telling me it’s no big deal,” and then listen again. You may be surprised at what they say, or how much they appreciate that you’re seeing beyond the surface.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Recall a recent conversation that was difficult. What specific things might have been different if you had listened with “the third ear” — with your whole self?

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## ASK FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

We often think the way to introduce people to Christ is by convincing or talking, and so while we are supposedly listening, we are really working to compose a brilliant response. But in fact, your talking may be interrupting what

<sup>2</sup> Larry Barker and Kittie Watson, *Listen Up* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 88.

<sup>3</sup> “Listening Facts,” International Listening Association, accessed March 2, 2017, <http://d1025403.site.myhosting.com/files.listen.org/Facts.htm#Barriers>.

God is trying to say to the person.

If you find yourself interrupting, ask yourself whether you were really listening, or just waiting for your turn to talk—which is not listening at all. When someone pauses in conversation, don't jump in right away. Give them space to think.

**4 DISCUSS ::** When you find yourself tempted to interrupt or you're focused on coming up with the right "answer" to people's questions, what's really going on? What do you think drives us to do that?

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Instead of composing your response while the other person is talking, listen carefully and ask yourself, *What does this person really need?* (Usually, it's not advice.) Consider this: In a series of six studies that followed 100 couples for the first seven years of marriage, researchers at the University of Iowa found that both husbands and wives feel lower marital satisfaction when they are given too much advice from a spouse, as opposed to too little. And—surprise!—unsolicited advice is the most damaging kind.<sup>4</sup> If this is true in marriages, it is probably true in every significant relationship.

As you're listening, notice small but significant comments and then practice the art of the follow-up question. The follow-up question can open the conversation like the door in the wardrobe opens to Narnia. Say, "Tell me more," or "How does that make you feel?" or "What makes you think that?" Then, be willing to wait—even in a few moments of silence—for them to share their thoughts or even to figure out what they think, since many people have never actually worked at articulating their beliefs. Take time to hear their whole story, not just their thoughts on spiritual matters.

**5 DISCUSS ::** For you, what is the hardest part of asking follow-up questions?

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Unfortunately many Christians miss the golden opportunities for follow-up questions because they fail to allow their God-given curiosity to emerge. Christians can often err on either extreme of the conversation continuum—being

conversationally too aggressive or too passive. But when we listen actively enough to stir up new areas of curiosity, the description of Proverbs 20:5 can begin to become the reality for us: *The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out* (NIV).

When we verbally express our curiosity about what's important to people (their lives, careers, family, and so on), we create an open, safe, and nonjudgmental forum for authentic dialogue. Our questions invite people to search for answers and naturally stimulate them toward discovering the condition, plans, and purposes of their own hearts.

**6 DISCUSS ::** Describe a conversation you've had in which you had the privilege of exploring a meaningful topic with someone. How did it impact that person? How did it impact you?

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There is a cost to curiosity. Wondering requires us to give up the illusion that we can manipulate or argue people into our point of view. Manipulative approaches communicate disrespect and stifle the supernatural allure of the Kingdom. Curiosity calls us to give up our need to control the conversation. It starts when we unleash our God-given inquisitiveness to ponder what we're noticing and hearing. A good balance of listening and curiosity helps a conversation move along naturally. If we are listening well, our wonder begins to percolate. If we are curious, we'll get plenty of opportunities to listen. As we continue to balance these two, only God knows where the conversation might lead.

**7 PRACTICE ::** Pair up to practice curiosity and listening.

Person 1: Ask the following question and let your curiosity lead to follow-up questions: "Who has been the biggest influence on your life, and what lessons did that person teach you?" Refrain from responding with your own ideas.

Person 2: Respond to the questions.

After a few minutes, switch roles.

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Discuss: When both people have finished, share what it was like to talk about a meaningful person in your life with someone who was curious and helped you to talk freely.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Bernstein, "The Perils of Giving Advice," *The Wall Street Journal* online, June 25, 2013.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Ask someone who knows you well, “What can I do to become a *better* listener?” Armed with their feedback, prayerfully look for conversations where you can practice the techniques of good listening they propose. If they give you several suggestions, just work on one at a time—for example, maybe you will spend a whole day just focusing on not interrupting. Notice how it impacts your ability to listen.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Listening requires a serving mindset, which begins with focus. Get away from distractions. Turn your face, body, and full attention to a person when you listen to them. Listen with “the third ear,” paying attention to more than just the words, and stay curious.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *A Listening Ear* by Paul Tournier (Augsburg Fortress)
- *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* by David Benner (InterVarsity Press)
- <http://www.wikihow.com/Be-a-Good-Listener>

## QPlace STORY

After the funeral service, Karen and her church hosted a meal for the grieving family and friends. As Karen entered the room, she recognized the daughter-in-law of the man who had died. After filling a plate with food, Karen walked over, introduced herself, and asked Connie if she could sit with her. Connie nodded, but her expression seemed closed and unwelcoming. Karen wondered what was going on in her life as every attempt to start a conversation seemed to hit a wall. Noticing Connie’s short responses and averted eye contact, she was tempted to get up and go help in the kitchen. But her heart told her to stay and listen.

As they were eating, Connie’s husband came to the table. He was able to talk more easily, and Karen listened intently for a thread that might lead back to Connie. When he made an offhand reference to her job, Karen turned to Connie and asked where she worked. At first, Connie only shared a little about her work as a convenience store

manager. But Karen was curious and asked follow-up questions to draw her out. And then, little by little, Connie began to open up. Every piece of information that Connie volunteered revealed a way to ask another question. Karen listened and learned as Connie poured out her difficulties at work—feeling betrayed by her company at being moved from a location she loved to one that she hated; having a long commute from home, away from her grandsons who used to visit her each day at work; and working in a horrible environment where she found urine in a bucket on a store shelf, and where an employee found a fetus among the mounds of litter in the parking lot.

Karen had interpreted Connie’s distance as rejection, but discovered that it was really the misery of Connie’s employment situation. Too heavy to approach in light conversation, her story required an ear committed to really listen. Karen was patient enough to offer Connie that gift.



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4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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***Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.***

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# The Art of Asking Questions

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**4.1 WHY ASK QUESTIONS?**

**4.2 WHY DON'T WE ASK GOOD QUESTIONS?**

**4.3 WHAT ARE GOOD QUESTIONS?**

**4.4 HOW CAN WE ASK GOOD QUESTIONS?**





# WHY ASK QUESTIONS?

## the **big** idea

The key to asking good questions is curiosity, which opens the door to meaningful conversations.

### **ice breaker**

Describe a time when someone was sincerely curious about your life. How did you know? How did it make you feel? What was your response to them?

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### **related Scripture**

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus . . . Philippians 2:3-5 (NIV)*

### **challenging wisdom**

*[Curiosity] is not the same as gathering information. Curiosity is a different way of discovering. When you are curious, you are no longer in the role of expert. Instead, you are . . . exploring their world with them, not superimposing your world on theirs.*

– Henry Kimsey-House

## CREATED TO BE CURIOUS

In 2009, researchers at the California Institute of Technology used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to record brain activity while subjects considered a variety of questions. After reading each question, the subjects would silently guess the answer and then rate how curious they were to know the correct answer. Since fMRI detects changes in the brain's oxygen consumption and blood flow, researchers were able to map areas of the brain that were involved as subjects responded to questions.

The study showed that a high level of curiosity correlated directly with a high level of brain activity. In addition, when subjects were curious about a question, the part of the brain that was engaged was linked with learning and memory. A follow-up behavioral study revealed that subjects would spend more of a limited resource such as time or money when they were more curious to discover an answer. The researchers concluded that curiosity plays a critical role in motivating learning and discovery.<sup>1</sup>

**1 DISCUSS ::** Have you ever been hungry to know or learn about something or someone? What did you do to satisfy your curiosity?

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Our amazing, omniscient, creative God has shaped us full of wonder, with an appetite to discover more about his creation—to be naturally curious. God has created us with the drive, or hunger, to want to learn new things, similar to the way we are created with physical hunger for food. This curiosity compels us to ask questions, to investigate, to seek to understand.

As revealed in the Cal-Tech fMRI study, our brain activity is heightened when we are curious. Not only that, but when we become curious, the part of our brain that is geared for

1 Min Jeong Kang, Ming Hsu, Ian M. Krajbich, George Loewenstein, Samuel M. McClure, Joseph Tao-yi Wang, Colin F. Camerer, "The Wick in the Candle of Learning: Epistemic Curiosity Activates Reward Circuitry and Enhances Memory," *Psychological Science*, Volume 20 (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 963-973.

learning and remembering is activated. As Christians who desire to engage in authentic spiritual conversations, if we can intentionally tap into this God-given bent to be curious, we may have the key to discovering excellent questions—questions that communicate to someone how much we really care. In fact, the word *curiosity* comes from the Latin root *cura*, “to care, to tend, and to heal.” When we care enough about some person, some question, we are motivated to know more, understand better, explore deeper. Curiosity, as it relates to relationships, is the humble, sincere interest to know and care more about another person and his or her thoughts, beliefs, passions, and doubts.

**2 PRACTICE ::** Look at one of your hands. Write down at least ten questions that arise from your own curiosity as you look at your hand. For example, if you were curious about a tree, your questions might be . . . *Where did its seed come from? How old is it? How deep are the roots? How many birds visit its branches? Why does it have brown bark? How does it know when to grow leaves and when to lose them? Why doesn't it tip over? Why does it have so many branches? What happens inside that I can't see? How long will it live?*

Now think of a person you know, preferably someone who doesn't seem to be interested in God, and do the same exercise—write down ten questions about him or her. Share your experience about this exercise with each other.\*

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\* Note: The concept for this practice came from *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci*. “[Leonardo da Vinci’s] *Curiosita* was as acute in observing fellow humans as it was in his study of horses, birds, water, and light. As he wrote, ‘Oh, that it may please God to let me also expound the psychology of the habits of man in such a fashion as I am describing his body!’ Leonardo’s deep interest in people from all walks of life is the source of the profound depth of character he illuminated in the subjects of his drawings and paintings.” *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci*, Michael J. Gelb (New York: Delacorte Press, 1998), 74-75.

**GOOD QUESTIONS BUILD CONNECTION**

Asking questions from genuine interest builds connection. It invites interaction, showing that you want a relationship rather than an audience. It demonstrates that you value the relationship enough to seek to understand more, to

hear another opinion or perspective. Respectful, honoring questions provide people the freedom to choose whether to respond and how much to respond. Meaningful questions give people the opportunity to wrestle with the truth about life, themselves, and God. Asking insightful questions is a loving approach that allows people to discover the truth about their situation.

It is amazing to notice throughout Scripture how many times our omniscient God asks questions. In fact, in the first recorded dialogue in Genesis, he asks four!

*Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”*

*He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”*

*And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”*

*The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”*

*Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”* Genesis 3:8-13 (NIV)

When Adam and Eve heard the familiar sound of the Lord God walking in the garden, they were hiding from him in their disobedience and fear. Clearly God knew where they were and what they had done, yet in that moment, God didn't grab hold and accuse them, destroy them, or reject them; he asked them questions.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Since God is all-knowing, what purposes would he have in asking questions?

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God's questions were the most loving way to connect with Adam and Eve after their disastrous rebellion. By starting his interaction with questions, he revealed that he wasn't abandoning them, that he wanted to interact with them even though their relationship had been forever

changed by sin. Throughout Scripture, God continues to ask people questions as he carries out his plan to restore people into full connection and relationship with him. Our questions to those who are alienated from God can also be the most loving approach to build rather than harm relationships.

**4 DISCUSS ::** What experience have you had of asking a question that led to a good conversation about God? What made it a good question?

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### CURIOSITY FUELS QUESTIONS

Our omniscient, loving God knows just the right questions to ask at the right time. But we are not all-knowing. If we adopt a policy of peppering our interactions with questions without regard to the reason behind asking those questions, our approach can become just as tiresome or annoying as monopolizing a conversation. Our questions face the danger of having an invasive edge that could kill a conversation—or a relationship. But God has provided us with an incredible gift that can open the door for questions that are a perfect fit. This gift is curiosity.

The brilliant scientist Albert Einstein said,

The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.<sup>2</sup>

“Holy” curiosity toward another person involves choice. We choose to notice people, allow them to matter to us, and extend love to them. Motivated by this love in the context of a relationship—and with God’s guidance—curiosity fuels our ability to ask good questions.

Curiosity focuses your attention on the other person, not yourself. It reduces the fear of not asking the “right” question, saying the “right” thing, or having the “right”

answer. Curiosity is the bridge that gets us from silently noticing another person to actively engaging with them.

**5 DISCUSS ::** What do you think hinders us from being curious about others around us?

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Proverbs teaches, *Wise men and women are always learning, always listening for fresh insights* (Proverbs 18:15, MSG). But now, perhaps more than ever, our curiosity is hindered by self-preoccupation, selfish pursuits, busyness, and distractions that lead to apathy about people around us. The apostle Paul’s direction to early Christians calibrates us as 21st-century believers:

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.* Philippians 2:3-5 (NIV)

To express your curiosity in others, begin with casual phrases like: “I couldn’t help noticing . . .” “I’m wondering . . .” or “I’m curious . . .” Your simple, humble interest is appealing to people; they will often be drawn to it. As you allow your Spirit-led curiosity to enter into conversations, you are likely to find that the way becomes open to ask more profound questions, activating curiosity in others that leads them to pursue life-changing answers for themselves.

**6 DISCUSS ::** How can you cultivate your curiosity about other people? What practical steps can you take to increase your level of curiosity about others?

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by John C. Maxwell, *The 15 Invaluable Laws of Growth* (New York: Center Street Publishing, 2012), 195.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Spend 15 minutes in a public place (coffee shop, mall, airport, etc.) and be curious about the people you notice. Ask yourself: *I wonder . . . What is their life like? What are their life dreams? What do they believe? When has their life been hard? When has it been fulfilling?* You could even write down some of your observations and potential questions. Pray for them.

Spend a little time with one person and practice asking questions based on your curiosity. You could initiate a conversation by simply stating: “I couldn’t help but notice . . .” followed by your question. This may be intimidating at first. Create it in a way that works for you, but challenge yourself.

You could ask the checkout clerk or coffee barista a simple question such as: “What’s new with you? How long have you worked here? Have you had a vacation lately? How was it? If you didn’t have to work today, what would you be doing instead?” The important element is that you notice and get curious. As you show interest in individuals’ lives, notice the impact of your sincere, pure curiosity on them.

## QPlace STORY

John met Ed after Ed had turned 80. John had recently moved into a townhome and Ed was his neighbor. Ed lived independently and was full of life, still dancing, dating, and driving. When John saw Ed sitting on his back patio, John would intentionally go out to talk with him. Over time, Ed and John established a warm friendship, despite the 50-plus age difference. They enjoyed walks in the park, parties, holidays, and birthdays.

Throughout this relationship, John found Ed extremely interesting. His life story captivated John. Often in their conversations John would find himself asking Ed about his youth, his war experience, his marriage, his adventures, and his career. Ed shared that he was

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

We are hard-wired by our awesome Creator to be naturally interested in learning more about people and his creation. Our curiosity and question-asking can be cultivated through practice and intentionality. Through meaningful questions, we can express our curiosity and demonstrate that we are honestly seeking to understand, know, and love.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *The Complete Book of Questions* by Garry Poole (Zondervan)
- *God Space* by Doug Pollock (Group Publishing Inc.)
- *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci* by Michael J. Gelb (Delacorte Press)
- *Questioning Evangelism* by Randy Newman (Kregel Publications)
- *Seeker Small Groups* by Garry Poole (Zondervan)

a teenage Ping-Pong champ, a successful lawyer, a ballroom dance instructor, and an adventurer, riding horseback across Cuba. John found out that Ed was a courageous war veteran who had defended his country in the Pacific theatre during World War II. His life was rich and deep and abundant with experiences—and the only way John discovered Ed’s story is because he felt interested enough to ask questions. Sixteen years later, when Ed was 96 years old, John had built the trust and relationship to ask him other meaningful questions, resulting in a spiritual conversation that impacted Ed’s relationship with God for eternity.



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# WHY DON'T WE ASK GOOD QUESTIONS?

## the **big** idea

Self-imposed barriers can hinder us from asking good questions that open opportunities for meaningful conversations.

### **ice breaker**

Do you know someone who is a great question-asker? What makes the person good at it? What is it about their questions that you most appreciate?

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### **related Scripture**

*Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

Colossians 4:5-6 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers.*

– Voltaire

*He explained to me with great insistence that every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer.*

– Elie Wiesel, *Night*

## WE DON'T ASK GOOD QUESTIONS . . . OUT OF FEAR

Imagine: You walk into your friend's party and notice a neighbor, but something seems different about her. As you walk toward her, she notices you, and you say, "Hi, Ellie! How are you?" As expected, she says, "Fine." Then, not wasting your hunch, you ask, "How are you, *really?*" Immediately, the emotions flow and she shares that she is getting a divorce. *Wow!* You did not see that one coming. You were expecting to continue on over to the dessert table and suddenly you are in an uncomfortable conversation in an awkward setting. And then, as Ellie continues to unload her story, she makes an offhand comment about God being too busy running the universe to bother with her problems.

If you have ever had an experience like that, you may have become reluctant to ask questions that venture deeper than a casual greeting. There are risks. You may find yourself in a conversation that calls for more relational investment than you had expected to give. You may feel ill-equipped to

respond when your question opens up a distorted view of life or God. You may fear stirring up issues without having solutions to offer. You may also fear that the person will rebuff your effort—viewing your honest, caring question as intrusive or impolite—and you'll end up feeling uncomfortable and awkward.

**1 DISCUSS ::** What scares you the most about asking questions? In what ways might anxiety prevent you from having better spiritual conversations with someone who is seeking God?

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Another reason we may not ask questions is because we anticipate a long-winded answer—and we don't have time to listen. We know that if we follow up with a response that delves deeper such as, "Tell me more about that," or "How

did that make you feel?" we're going to have to be patient while they tell us their story.

These are all real risks, but you don't need to let fear of what might happen control you. God could be opening up an incredible connection that's worth both the time and the potential of being shut down or misunderstood. God could also be providing an opportunity to extend the conversation.

When you realize that a question has stirred up emotion that feels too weighty for the time that you have available, you could look for a pause, affirm what the person just said, and then communicate that you really want to talk more about this when you have more time, or in a place where there aren't so many distractions, or after you have had a chance to think about it for a while. And then, right there, suggest a few times and a place where you really could engage better in this conversation.

But if you seem never to have margin in your life for important conversations with people whom God has placed in your path, it's worth reviewing your pace of life and the price you are paying for it. If busyness is a chronic pattern, you may ask God to reveal how to slow down and what to cut out.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Describe a conversation with someone who seemed distracted or hurried, and how you felt. Conversely, what was it like to talk with someone who really took time with you? What did they say or do to communicate their interest?

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### WE DON'T ASK GOOD QUESTIONS . . . BECAUSE OF OUR OWN AGENDA

The introduction to the website [www.asktheatheist.com](http://www.asktheatheist.com) asks: "Do you have a question for an atheist? Ever wonder what atheists think about morality, faith, science, etc.? How do atheists live their lives without a god? How do they know right from wrong?"

The website also has a series of questions for atheists to ask Christians, such as, "Why is God such a huge proponent of slavery? How do we explain the fact that Jesus has never

appeared to you? Why would Jesus want you to eat his body and drink his blood?"

Although it is interesting to note that atheists have a strategy of asking Christians questions, another question worth pondering is *Do these questions have an agenda or do they show sincere willingness to understand the life, worldview, perspective, and beliefs of a Christian?*

Frequently, the reason that we don't ask good questions is that we come into a conversation with an agenda. Though we may start with a question, the interaction easily morphs into a one-sided "proclamation." We lose curiosity about the other person's story because we're more concerned with telling them what we're thinking, or "proving" that we're right and they're wrong. Worse, when we do stop talking, we may only be feigning interest because we are "re-loading" for when they finish their thought, so we can share our comeback

As Christians, how can we avoid using loaded—or even combative or antagonistic—questions as weapons for our agenda? How can our questions flow from love and respect so that people feel safe and free to express their perspective and wrestle with truth?

**3 DISCUSS ::** Would people describe you as a person who has an agenda when you talk to them? Explain your answer.

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Certainly, we as Christ-followers have a message to share. But the apostle Paul, in Colossians 4:5-6, counsels us to *be wise* in the way we interact with outsiders, *making the most of every opportunity*, and that our conversation should *be always full of grace, seasoned with salt*. Salt makes food appealing; it causes us to desire more. And asking good questions has the same effect in a conversation.

While it is important to *be prepared to give an answer* for what we believe (1 Peter 3:15, NIV), consider this: Giving an answer means the other person asked a question. If they asked a question, we must have stopped talking. And if they had enough curiosity to fill the silence with their question, we must have done a good job listening and letting them know we are safe enough for them to share their uncertainties.

A meaningful conversation begins with listening and

asking questions; then as part of a normal relational dialogue, with the other person's prompting and pace, we can share our own perspective *with gentleness and respect* (1 Peter 3:15).

The bottom line is that we must make a connection with people, not just relay information. (A billboard can do that!) If we want people to listen to us, we must first listen to them—setting aside our agenda so that our only agenda is love.

**4 DISCUSS ::** What religious billboard messages have you seen?

When discussing your faith with an unbeliever, describe a time you found yourself communicating in a “billboard” way—instead of curiously listening and asking good questions.

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## WE DON'T ASK GOOD QUESTIONS . . . OUT OF HABIT

In most conversations, people appreciate short, to-the-point answers; that is certainly true in the business world, where many of us spend most of our time. But in a relational context, questions that can be answered “yes” or “no” or with a quick fact, tend to fall flat. We have to shift gears when we're engaging in relational conversations—to ask open-ended and exploratory questions that cannot be answered in one word, so we can draw people out and encourage them to tell their stories.

Learning how to ask caring, nonthreatening questions based on heartfelt curiosity is important in any relational context, but it's especially crucial in discussions about God. One tip is to focus on “what” and “how” questions. You can also make a comment that acts like a question. For example, “Your hat looks like it has a story” is really an open invitation for someone to tell you a story that just may be important in that person's life.

**5 DISCUSS ::** What are some great open-ended questions to ask someone about God?

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“Why?” questions can be good open-ended question starters, but they need to be handled with care. When high-tech or high-risk enterprises such as the military, a

nuclear power plant, or NASA debrief accidents, they use a systematic method to drill down quickly and thoroughly to the “root cause.” Trained professionals are taught to do rigorous interviews, and one approach encourages the interviewers to ask each person “Why?” five times in the process. Such a barrage no doubt starts to feel like a threat, as if a lawyer is trying to catch you in a lie. Mark Paradies, an expert in the field who advocates a different approach, notes that “The ‘Why’ question turns off the ‘remembering’ trail that we want the brain to go down, and turns on the ‘justification’ trail.”

We can unintentionally back people into a corner if we ask a question such as “Why did you do that?” Our question could be interpreted as “You *shouldn't* have done that!” To avoid this critical edge, “Why” questions in particular should come out of wondering, not out of accusation. When all of our questions are prompted by curiosity and genuine interest, a person is likely to feel safe and welcomed, not interrogated, accused, or put on the defensive. No matter how our questions start, a supportive, interested tone may be the main “message” the other person hears—rather than the words we actually say.

**6 DISCUSS ::** What keeps you from asking questions when you engage in conversations about God? What open-ended question might help in such situations?

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**7 PRACTICE ::** Break into pairs.

- Person #1, ask Person #2 an open-ended question based on something you have observed about him or her. Continue with follow-up questions coming from genuine curiosity. For 3-4 minutes, see how well you can create good questions.
- Then, Person #2, give feedback about how well Person #1 listened, and about the questions. Which were useful? Which fell flat? Which seemed like an interrogation? Which felt noseey?

Switch roles and repeat the exercise.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Keep a log this week of good questions you hear (or come up with yourself), or examples of people not asking good questions (including times when you don't). What factors help people ask good questions, and what seems to be the reason for not-so-good ones?

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

To “make the most of every opportunity,” we can develop intentional habits of asking questions motivated by love and curiosity, not any personal agendas; then our conversation will be appealing, like salt. Asking good questions can be learned, can be practiced, and can be extremely rewarding.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *The Art of Spiritual Listening* by Alice Fryling (Shaw Books)
- *Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community . . . While We Still Can* by Tim Downs (Moody Press)
- *Quick-to-Listen Leaders* by David Ping and Anne Clippard (Group Publishing)

## QPlace STORY

Dave and Janet were responding to an advertisement for used bedroom furniture, and as the homeowner opened the door, Dave noted that she looked very ill. The hopelessness and despair that Dave sensed caused him to feel compassion for her and uneasiness in his spirit. All kinds of questions were bouncing around in his head: *Does she have a church? Is she praying? Is anyone around her ministering to her? Is she angry at God?*

While discussing the furniture purchase, Dave was completely distracted and could not stop thinking about the woman's physical and spiritual condition, wondering if she had a relationship with Jesus Christ. During a brief price negotiation, Dave uncharacteristically agreed to a higher price than he originally wanted to pay. He wrote the check, but he didn't ask any questions. Dave left hastily to another personal appointment, with a lingering disturbance in his gut. He

rationalized that he could pursue a meaningful conversation with her when he returned to pick up the furniture, even though his heart was urging him to ask her about her condition.

After a few days, Dave went back to pick up the bedroom set. He had often thought about the woman since his initial visit, and he was prepared to talk about Christ with her that day. But when he arrived, the door was answered by an unfamiliar man. He introduced himself as the son of the woman and informed Dave that his mother had died a few days before of cancer.

Dave left with his furniture but deeply regretted that he had missed an opportunity to minister to this woman, to love her, and maybe to be a part of God's plan in her life—if he had just asked her a few questions.



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800.369.0307  
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Wheaton, IL 60187

***Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.***

# WHAT ARE GOOD QUESTIONS?

## the **big idea**

Flowing out of genuine interest, good questions draw people out and spur on conversation.

### **ice breaker**

What unique question have you been asked in a job interview?

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### **related Scripture**

*As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus, . . . began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more. . . . Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.”*

Mark 10:46-51 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*We are exploring together. We are cultivating the garden together, backs to the sun. The question is a hoe in our hands and we are digging beneath the hard and crusty surface to the rich humus of our lives.*

– Parker Palmer

## **GOOD QUESTIONS UNCOVER STORIES**

A not-for-profit organization called StoryCorps provides people of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of their lives. This organization preserves and shares stories “to remind one another of our shared humanity, to strengthen and build the connections between people, to teach the value of listening, and to weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that every life matters.”<sup>1</sup> To unearth the incredible stories buried away in the lives of people, StoryCorps asks questions. Here are a few examples: What was the happiest moment of your life? Who has been the biggest influence on your life, and what lessons did that person teach you?

Every person has a story—a lifetime of experiences that have shaped them and impacted their emotions, their

spiritual life (or lack thereof), and their relationships. All these little stories make up their big story. When people have some space to tell their stories, they feel loved and empowered. So if you want to show love to people, listen to their stories; and to unlock their stories, ask good questions.

Good questions allow people to discover—or rediscover—themselves, and uncover new truths. Good questions show that we care enough to be curious. And true curiosity—genuine interest in a person and his or her story—flows from the conviction that each person’s life matters. Being authentically curious about someone’s thoughts and opinions can create a bond of trust that allows deeper and more significant conversations to continue and grow. And, good questions can also help people face and wrestle with their beliefs about God.

**1 PRACTICE ::** Let curiosity lead you in asking good follow-up questions as each person in the group responds to this question: How did you typically spend summers when you were in grade school? After everyone has answered this question, discuss how these stories have affected what you feel about the others in your group.

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**2 DISCUSS ::** Describe a time when you experienced someone communicating an inaccurate view of Christianity. As a group, discuss what question you could ask as a “learner” that would communicate your care for the person through the conversation.

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Becoming a good question-asker depends on having the right heart and right motives when engaging others in conversations. We are at our best when we align our heart and motives with our leader, Jesus.

Consider this example from the life of Jesus in Mark 10: Jesus was walking out of Jericho in the middle of a clamoring crowd. Bartimaeus, a blind man, was sitting beside the road shouting for Jesus’ attention over the din. When Jesus heard him, he stopped, told the people to bring him over, and asked him, “*What do you want me to do for you?*”

In this brief interaction, Jesus doesn’t ask many questions, or even a particularly profound question. His question is simple, but the entire scene reveals that it comes from a heart of great care for this man. First, Jesus is attentive; he hears the cry of Bartimaeus over the noise. Second, even though the crowd rebukes and disregards Bartimaeus, Jesus puts all of his plans on hold in order to stop and connect with him. Then, Jesus responds in a way that shows Bartimaeus is not a project, but a valued person. Rather than just assuming this man wants to be able to see, Jesus asks a question that allows Bartimaeus the dignity of communicating what he most desires—and in that moment, Bartmaeus also is given the chance to reveal his faith in Jesus.

Reporters know that it takes practice to develop good question-asking skills. But reporters who focus solely on producing an article or a news clip ask questions much differently from those who truly value the people they are interviewing. When we take a personal interest in someone and come into a conversation as a learner, our questions reveal our care for them. It’s helpful to wonder, *What can I learn from this person? How does God want me to relate to this person? What does God want me to learn in this interaction?*

## CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD QUESTIONS

Asking good questions doesn’t mean firing a barrage of inquiries at someone or using a formula. Instead, good questions are combined with good listening. The goal is to help people feel safe and heard, not attacked or like a “project.” Here are five characteristics of good questions:

1. Good questions originate from curiosity and a genuine interest in another person.
2. Good questions are open-ended. Use classic starters like *Who, What, Why,* and *How* (motivated by curiosity rather than interrogation).
3. Good questions are concise. Don't ramble—end at the question mark and then listen.
4. Good questions connect with what’s being discussed and take the discussion to the next step rather than come out of nowhere.
5. Good questions help people feel safe and understood. Rephrase what they said to be sure you understood their answer and to give them a chance to correct you if you didn’t.

Good questions help people in the process of self-discovery and God-discovery. For example, a great question to ask is “How do you think God might have been active in that?” This question invites people to consider how God may actually have been present in the story they are telling about themselves (which might be a stretch for a non-Christian), and helps them to pay attention to what he might be doing in the present as well.

It’s tempting to ask questions just to get people to give us the “right answer” and then move on. But the goal of spiritual conversations is dialogue—a two-way exchange. To that end, often the best questions are follow-up questions. When we invite someone to tell us something or share an opinion, we should not move on too quickly. Instead, ask questions to clarify, or get more details, or have them

elaborate on emotions. (“How did that make you feel?” or “Wow, can you tell me more about that?”) Avoid follow-up questions that accuse. (“How on earth can you think that?” or “Why would anyone do such a thing?”)

**3 DISCUSS ::** How do those who know you well rate you as a question-asker who helps them feel safe and heard?

Based on what you are learning, what could you do to improve?

**4 DISCUSS ::** In what circumstances do you find yourself drifting toward questions that inhibit good conversations?

What helps you come up with better ones?

**5 DISCUSS ::** Describe a time when a person who was trying to prove you wrong or convince you to change your mind questioned you or found fault with your thinking. How did that feel?

## PRACTICES TO AVOID

The word *question* comes from the Latin root *querere*, “to ask, seek.” It’s related to the word *query*. In its purest form, a question seeks an answer or information that you do not yet have. When we ask questions to lead someone to agree to our belief, people typically resent the feeling of being “set up.” To help you create good questions, here are some practices to avoid:

1. Don’t primarily use closed-ended (yes/no) or multiple choice questions. They tend to kill a conversation.
2. Don’t ask leading, coercive, or cornering questions. For example, rather than asking, “Why don’t you believe in God when there’s so much overwhelming evidence he exists?” you could say, “God is very real to me, and yet at times I have doubts. I’m wondering what doubts you might have.”
3. Don’t ask and then answer your own question in your question. For example: “Why did you stop going to church; was it the boring sermons?”
4. Don’t fill the silence after your question. Enjoy the pause! For example, don’t keep adding to your question with pile-on phrases like, “Would you like to meet me for coffee next week? . . . Or maybe you are too busy? . . . Or is next week too soon? . . . Or would you like to just call me instead of deciding right now?”
5. Don’t ask formulaic or methodical questions. People can tell when they are the recipients of canned questions or a rehearsed approach. Be natural and winsome and consider the context.

Rather than crafting questions the way a trial lawyer would—to expose weaknesses or to prove a point—ask questions that help people sort through their opinions. If you disagree with a person, express that as a statement rather than a question. Then ask questions that invite the person to clarify their thinking, or explain how they arrived at their point of view, or share why they take that stance among all the possible positions.

People often express an opinion before they have thought it through completely. While articulating an opinion or belief, a person may change their mind, consciously or subconsciously, because of their dissatisfaction with their own answer. This is especially true for individuals who process their thoughts out loud. By avoiding poor practices and asking good questions you may draw them out, not shut them down.

**6 PRACTICE ::** Share your answer to the question, “Where have you seen God act in your life lately?” Share a specific instance that showed you God’s presence, not just vague blessings like health or food on the table.

Practice asking one or two follow-up questions before moving on to the next person. Remember the characteristics of good questions and practices to avoid.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Pick one of the characteristics of good questions to practice every day this week. Note what effect that characteristic has on conversations. Also choose one of the practices to avoid, and watch for it in conversations around you this week. Note what effect that practice has on conversations.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Good questions flow out of genuine interest and prompt people to tell their stories. Rather than being formulaic or leading, they're open-ended, promote conversation, and help people feel that you care about them.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us* by Stan Guthrie (Baker)
- *The God Questions: Exploring Life's Great Questions About God* by Hal Seed (Outreach Publishers)
- *Listening Is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project* by Dave Isay (Penguin Press)
- "Asking Questions Like Jesus," blog post by Pastor James Faris: <http://gentlereformation.org/2012/10/03/asking-questions-like-jesus/>

## QPlace STORY

One year in February, three friends, David, Jeff, and John, began meeting with a handful of guys. The guys knew what they were in for: spiritual questions. A "Q" Place. It started very low key, with no agenda except to have the chance to talk about the really important things in life without anyone saying you were right or wrong.

At the first meeting, the friends asked, "If you could ask God one question and you knew he would answer you, what would you ask him?"

Phil answered first: "Why couldn't you have made things more clear?" The other three simply listened with curiosity to Phil's reasons for asking that question. Then the others opened up and questions poured out.

A year later, they were still at it. Even though they were not too sure yet about the Bible, they were becoming hungry to discover answers to their questions. At the end of one of the meetings, Jeff asked everyone, "What's the offer Jesus makes?"

The next time they met, Paul came with a printed copy of a Google-generated gospel explanation—from Chuck Swindoll! Paul plopped his paper down on the table, pointed to two "foreign" words mentioned in the explanation, and asked John what "substitutionary atonement" meant. Clearly, he was seeking an answer. With a quick prayer, John briefly explained the meaning of those two words, and then Paul remarked in amazement that he'd never heard that before. If they hadn't started asking good questions, Paul may never have been open to the gospel message.



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# HOW CAN WE ASK GOOD QUESTIONS?

## the big idea

Good questions connect with a person’s life story to build strong relational trust.

### ice breaker

What is a controversial question you have about another religion? How would you word that question to a member of that faith so they would not feel threatened, yet could give you an honest answer?

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### related Scripture

*At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”*

*“No one, sir,” she said.*

*“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared.*

*“Go now and leave your life of sin.”*

John 8:9-11 (NIV)

*Fools have no interest in understanding;*

*they only want to air their own opinions.*

Proverbs 18:2 (NLT)

### challenging wisdom

*A sudden, bold and unexpected question doth many times surprise a man and lay him open.*

– Francis Bacon

*What people think of as the moment of discovery is really the discovery of the question.*

– Jonas Salk

## PUSH TOWARD DEEPER COMMUNICATION LEVELS

Experts who study human behavior have identified five levels of communication as it relates to relational connection and risk:

### Level 1 – Facts

The first, or surface level, is simply exchanging information—news, facts, and data.

### Level 2 – Opinions

The second level is when we talk about other people’s opinions—reporting what we read or heard others say about a topic on television, in magazines, or on the Internet.

### Level 3 – Personal Opinions

The next slightly deeper level is expressing our own opinions. Here we risk someone disagreeing with us,

challenging, or even rejecting us. Something of our true self starts to show more directly at this level.

### Level 4 – Feelings

Deeper still is when we begin to talk about our own emotions and personal experiences, where we add a “heart” component to the “head” dimensions of the other levels. People can reject our opinions and we can still stay in relationship, but if they reject our feelings, it may be very hard to maintain any connection.

### Level 5 – Needs and Desires

The deepest level of intimacy occurs when we reveal our needs, desires, and longings. We open up our most vulnerable self. Rejection here is terminal in terms of the relationship; we simply don’t stay in any meaningful

connection with another person who doesn't accept this part of our soul.

All five levels can emerge during spiritual conversations, but by their very nature, personal and spiritual matters move toward deeper levels. That is where the activity of God is most needed—and most healing—for people. The Gospels are sprinkled with short glimpses of Jesus' conversations with individuals, and while the recorded dialogue is usually brief, he works through all kinds of communication to get at the heart of what people really need. Notice in the account of the woman caught in adultery in John 8, how Jesus asks a very simple, Level 1 question: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" And then, without any fanfare, simply and gently he calls out her deepest need and releases her from condemnation to live a life free from the sin that had trapped her.

As we interact with people, we don't have the benefit, as Jesus did, of knowing perfectly the need of each person and knowing exactly how to approach that need. For us, being aware of these different levels of communication can help us graciously move people toward the deeper levels as we get to know them better.

**1 DISCUSS ::** How easy is it for you to have conversations that go to the deeper levels of communication?

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What keeps you from going deeper with people—even people you know and trust?

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What keeps you from encouraging others to go deeper?

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Asking a good question can help you move into deeper levels of communication. Too often we ask questions that require only facts as answers. It's much easier, and much more automatic, to ask information-seeking or yes/no

questions than to formulate questions that help people think and that stir up a conversation. Unfortunately, a series of information-seeking questions is highly unlikely to stimulate either good thinking or good discussion. The right questions can be a catalyst for growth. But often there are open opportunities to ask meaningful questions, and we miss them—out of fear or simply because we're not curious.

Good questions grow out of curiosity; otherwise they will feel loaded, formulaic, or insincere. When a question comes to mind through your own curiosity, it becomes natural—rather than fearful—to ask it. Curiosity invites interaction and creates a connection. Connections build trust. Trust is the bridge that can bear the weight of truth, conflict, and disagreement. Through curiosity we demonstrate love because we are honoring the other person and building the relationship.

**2 DISCUSS ::** What are some examples of questions that shut down rather than foster curiosity and connection?

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### DRAW OUT THEIR STORY

Good questions, arising from your curiosity, connect not just with a person's thoughts and opinions, but with a person's life story. Every person has a story—a lifetime's collection of experiences, both good and bad, that have shaped them, impacted their emotions, their spiritual life (or lack thereof), and their relationships. And their big story is made up of lots of little stories. When people have some space to tell their stories, they feel loved and empowered. Connecting with someone's story continues to build strong relationships of trust. So, as you develop relationships with people, look for questions that can be answered with a story.

Here are some examples of a few "go to" questions:

- Next to your job, what consumes most of your time?
- Outside of your work, on what do you consider yourself an authority?
- Where did you go to school? What did it teach you about life?
- If you could relive one vacation, which would it be? Why?

- I was really interested in what you said about \_\_\_\_\_. Can you tell me more about that?
- For you, why is \_\_\_\_\_ so important?
- How has \_\_\_\_\_ affected you?

**3 PRACTICE ::** Come up with a question for the person next to you—a question that is likely to be answered with a story.

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In pairs, take turns asking the questions and listening carefully to one another.

You can learn how to ask good questions by watching others, reading books, and asking people for honest feedback. There are many great resources available to help you. (See “Resources to Check Out” on the next page.) But do some research on your own—look for books, websites, and articles on the topic. Also be on the lookout for role models—people who just seem to be good at asking questions. Borrow their methods. For example, pastor Bill Hybels suggests a great question to get people to open up. Simply ask, “How are you doing, *really*?” That last word, tacked onto a question that can be answered far too easily, changes it a lot. Another great question is to follow the standard, “Where are you from?” by adding, “And what do you most like about living there?” You can do the same thing with, “What do you do for a living?” by following it with, “What do you like most—and least—about your work?” These follow-up questions open up the possibility for simple conversations to go to much deeper levels. They’re also nonthreatening because the person answering is free to be as transparent as they choose.

**4 PRACTICE ::** How are you doing, *really*? (Go ahead and answer.)

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How do you feel when someone takes the time to ask you that question and then listens to the answer?

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## TAKE RISKS TO DELVE INTO CONTROVERSY

In polite conversation, people stay away from issues that could lead to conflict. But as a growth exercise, try fearlessly asking about things like politics, gay rights, war, racism, or whatever. The purpose is not to create an argument or change anyone’s mind, but rather for you to learn how to “hold some space” for people to share their opinions without your judgment.

Dare to welcome disagreement. Your positive handling of disagreement can help people learn how to disagree agreeably, in love and without fear or anger. Ask follow-up questions that convey genuine interest—ask people how they came to the opinions they hold.

If controversial topics scare you, talk about why you’re afraid to talk about these things. Notice the judgments that crop up, and how they move you toward or away from the person. Don’t be afraid to exercise the mental muscles required to discuss controversial issues with respect and kindness.

There is no magic pill you can take to improve in asking questions and engaging people who believe differently than you. The only way to get better at asking questions is to practice asking questions!

**5 DISCUSS ::** What intimidates you most about discussing controversial topics?

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What steps can you take to overcome your fear of these kinds of questions?

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Be careful not to fatigue someone with a succession of questions without the space for them to think! It is important to be aware of body language and detect if you need to pull back and allow time for a question to germinate. Questions are not weapons to be volleyed rapid-fire like an interrogator, but are embedded naturally in a conversation. Energized by curiosity, questions help to create an open, learning conversation. You can use questions to demonstrate your willingness to explore and listen to other thoughts and views, while also engaging in the conversation with your thoughts and views.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Engage someone conversationally in a topic that you find controversial. If it makes you feel more comfortable, actually tell the person that you have an assignment to get their point of view on a contentious issue. (People are usually flattered when they get selected for such an assignment and feel safer when they know the reason you are “probing.”) Ask follow-up questions that draw the person out, and at the end, summarize the person’s point of view so that they confirm you’ve heard them and understand their reasoning. (Also, don’t be too surprised if, after the whole interview, the person wants to know what you think as well.)

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Asking good questions requires courage and willingness to engage in a more authentic kind of conversation, one that delves into the realm of opinions and feelings. You can learn

to navigate controversial issues with respect so that you aren’t just airing your own point of view but actually learning something about the other person’s way of seeing things.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us* by Stan Guthrie (Baker)
- *The Complete Book of Questions: 1001 Conversation Starters for Any Occasion* by Garry Poole (Zondervan)
- *How to Ask Great Questions: Guide Your Group to Discovery With These Proven Techniques* by Karen Lee-Thorp (NavPress)
- "Writing Questions that Spark Discussion": <http://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2010/writing-questions-that-spark-discussion.html> (accessed March 22, 2017)

## QPlace STORY

Scott and John had been meeting regularly with several young men to mentor and tutor them. The teenagers were Muslim refugees from Africa acclimating to life in the States. When they gathered, John would often allow one of the youths to pick an ice-breaker question for discussion to open their time together, using Garry Poole’s *The Complete Book of Questions*.

At first the boys acted too cool to pick a question, so John or Scott would. Over time, the boys looked forward to the question time—and even competed for who could be the question-picker. They picked questions like: If you were a professional wrestler, what would your

name be? What is true love? What is sin?

The questions opened up rich and meaningful discussions among Scott, John, and the boys. Scott and John learned about the boys’ beliefs, opinions, and thoughts. Participating as equals in answering the questions, Scott and John were also able to share their faith, beliefs, and opinions. Through the questions, the group of friends interacted naturally, respectfully, and openly about important life matters. These discussions also opened up natural opportunities for further conversations with the young men about faith and Jesus.



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# The Art of Loving

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**5.1 WHY LOVE?**

**5.2 WHAT IS GOD'S LOVE LIKE?**

**5.3 HOW CAN WE TRULY LOVE OTHERS?**

**5.4 HOW CAN WE LOVE PEOPLE WHO ARE HURTING?**





# WHY LOVE?

## the **big** idea

Because God loves us so extravagantly, we are compelled to express that love to others.

### ice breaker

How can you tell when people are truly loving? What attributes or actions do they exhibit?

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### related **Scripture**

*God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear. . . . We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 1 John 4:16-20 (NIV)*

### challenging **wisdom**

*God's definition of what matters is pretty straightforward. He measures our lives by how we love.*

– Francis Chan

*Love of our neighbor is the only door out of the dungeon of self. . . .*

– George MacDonald

## GOD LOVES US

One evening, about a hundred years ago, a thousand people were packed into the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Wales.

Amidst the intense emotion and fervent prayer of the evening, a solo voice sang out for the first time the beautiful lyrics of the hymn entitled “Here Is Love” by William Rees. This hymn about God’s overwhelming love for the world became the “love song” for the Welsh revival, impacting thousands for Jesus Christ throughout Great Britain and several other countries. These lyrics and the truths that they convey stir many hearts even today. The song begins with “Here is love, vast as the ocean, Loving-kindness as the flood,” and includes this stanza:

*On the mount of crucifixion,  
Fountains opened deep and wide;  
Through the floodgates of God's mercy,  
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.  
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,*

*Poured incessant from above,  
And Heaven's peace and perfect justice  
Kissed a guilty world in love.*

Here is an amazing picture of God’s love for us: Love as vast as the ocean. Did you know that the oceans contain 343 quintillion gallons of water? That’s 343 billion BILLION gallons. That’s a lot of water! That’s a lot of love!

These lyrics provide an image of God’s love as endlessly immeasurable. Yet his love is also as tender as a kiss, or an arm around the shoulder. God’s love is not scarce, about to run out. God is not stingy with his love, parsing it out in tiny bits. God is not controlling with his love, holding it back to punish us. God is an ardent lover, an exuberant lover. God begins his communication of love in his creation—a vibrant sunset, a warm puppy, a juicy apple. Then, God culminates his incredible expression of sacrificial love for us in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends* (John 15:13, NIV).

**1 DISCUSS ::** Share your favorite hymn, song, poem, or verse about God’s love. Why is it your favorite?

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Scripture uses a variety of metaphors to paint a picture of God’s love, such as a parent’s love for a child or a husband’s love for his wife. Although helpful, each metaphor falls short of fully capturing the immensity of God’s love. Any way you look at it, God’s love is extreme. This sacrificial, boundless, and deep love is a love worth investigating, understanding, experiencing, and sharing.

Zephaniah 3:17 (NKJV) presents evocative imagery of God’s love toward his people:

*The LORD your God in your midst,  
The Mighty One, will save;  
He will rejoice over you with gladness,  
He will quiet you with His love,  
He will rejoice over you with singing.*

It is crazy (but true!) to think that God celebrates us, calms us with his love, and sings us a love song. It is this incredible love that Paul implores us to grasp in Ephesians 3:18-19 (NLT):

*And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully.*

It is this love that we are compelled to share with those who do not yet know him. Because we have experienced this lavish love, we are motivated to spread it in tangible ways to people in our world who are burdened with guilt and judgment, without God and without hope.

**2 DISCUSS ::** How have you experienced God’s love in tangible ways in your own life?

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### WE LOVE BECAUSE HE LOVES US

God’s crazy love for us can be hard to believe, especially because deep down we are all aware of parts of us that we

consider unlovable. We spend millions of dollars to hide our perceived “unloveliness”—with products as simple as breath mints or as extreme as plastic surgery. We are harsh critics of ourselves and we’re prone to judge others. Think about your response to your roommate’s snoring, your spouse’s thoughtlessness, your coworker’s impatience—not to mention bad drivers, rude cell phone users, and indifferent department of motor vehicle workers.

How incredible that God sees us as precious and of infinite worth. Despite our shortcomings, God is still madly in love with each of us. He considers us his treasure, his beloved children. As our loving heavenly Father, he dotes on us. Maybe he even brags about us to the angels!

So what are we to do with this outlandish love that God “pours incessantly” out on us? The answer is evident in 1 John 4:19 (NIV): *We love because he first loved us.*

Musician Aaron Niequist explains it this way in his song “Changed”:

*We have been blessed,  
now we’re gonna be a blessing.  
We have been loved,  
now we’re gonna bring love.  
We’ve been invited,  
we’re gonna share the invitation.  
We have been changed, to bring change.*

We are called to love the down-and-out and the up-and-coming, the wallflower and the gadfly, the atheist and the religious, friend and enemy. Jesus showed us how to do this. He was called a “friend of sinners.”

**3 DISCUSS ::** What are some simple ways that this love we’ve so generously received can be expressed to someone outside the family of God?

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The apostle Paul gives us a clear description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NIV):

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

**4 PRACTICE ::** Read through the following verses again and substitute your name for the word *love*. For example: [Jordan] is patient, [Jordan] is kind.... Then read through a second time and adjust each sentence so that you can insert a phrase similar to the phrase “with people who are different from me.” For example: I am patient with people who are different from me, I am kind to people who are different from me.

\_\_\_\_\_ is patient, \_\_\_\_\_ is kind, \_\_\_\_\_ does not envy, \_\_\_\_\_ does not boast, \_\_\_\_\_ is not proud. \_\_\_\_\_ does not dishonor others, \_\_\_\_\_ is not self-seeking, \_\_\_\_\_ is not easily angered, \_\_\_\_\_ keeps no record of wrongs. \_\_\_\_\_ does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. \_\_\_\_\_ always protects, \_\_\_\_\_ always trusts, \_\_\_\_\_ always hopes, \_\_\_\_\_ always perseveres.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Did the words that you read about yourself seem true to you? Why or why not?

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What would your friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, and family say about this passage with your name in it? (These are hard questions to consider. Don't be discouraged. They are not intended to create guilt.)

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What would happen if you changed each phrase to read: “[I want to be] patient, [I want to be] kind...”?

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How can you move toward a lifestyle known more for love? How can you love more tomorrow than today?

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a concrete surface. Even back in Roman times, cement was the binder that held the aggregate materials together. Love is like that—it binds all relationships together. This idea is reinforced in Colossians 3:14 (NLT): *Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.*

Similarly, the Art of Loving is the thread woven throughout all of the 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations, holding them together. If we do not love when we notice, pray, listen, and ask questions, our attempts will fail. If we do not love when we welcome people, facilitate well, serve together with others, and share God's story, our attempts will crumble. Love is the glue.

When Jesus is asked to describe the greatest commandment, he makes it clear that the core value is love:

*Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39, NIV).*

Although the Great Commandment is not normally considered a passage relating to evangelism and the Great Commission, it is the starting point for sharing the good news about Jesus. In fact, loving God and loving others will galvanize our involvement in the Great Commission. If we strive to love others as God loves us, we can begin to build trusting friendships and earn the right to engage in spiritual conversations with people outside of our churches.

God invites ordinary men and women in their everyday lives to make an extraordinary impact with an extraordinary message: *God extravagantly loves ALL people.*

**6 DISCUSS ::** How have you viewed the relationship between the Great Commandment (to love God and love others) and the Great Commission (to go and make disciples)? What new insights do you have today?

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Reminded of God's love for you, what would you like to change in your life to make loving God and loving others a priority?

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## LOVE HOLDS IT ALL TOGETHER

When a contractor is constructing a roadway, he takes cement and mixes it with crushed rock and water to create

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

The next time you are in a crowded, busy place (store, traffic jam, train station, classroom, restaurant), intentionally bless people. Randomly select people in the crowd and determine to have only one thought about each person you see: to love and silently bless them as people uniquely created by God who have infinite worth because Jesus died for them.

What do you recognize happening to *you* while you perform this practice? What do you feel during this exercise? How might God feel as well?

Write down your observations and impressions.

Partner with someone else in the group and share (by phone, email, or in person) how your experience went, how you felt, and what you learned. Be sure to encourage and celebrate each experience!

## QPlace STORY

Scott and Laurie welcomed the African refugee family at the airport. Eleven people—two adults and nine children—arrived in this strange land fleeing the violent war in their homeland thousands of miles away. They did not speak their new country's language. They had only the clothes on their backs and one small bag. Despite the ethnic, religious, and economic differences, Scott and Laurie chose to welcome this family, orient them to their new country, and demonstrate God's love to them because of the love they had experienced from God.

After several years of faithfulness to this family, Scott and Laurie's love and commitment were challenged when one of the boys, Abdi, was diagnosed with cancer. There were countless meetings with

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

When we experience the reality of God's love poured out in us, it overflows into the lives of everyone around us. Noticing people, engaging them in conversation, asking meaningful questions, listening empathetically, serving with them, and inviting them into relationship are not only powerful expressions of God's love, they are also dependent on his love in order to be authentic, meaningful, and compelling.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* by Francis Chan (David C. Cook)
- *Life of the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen (Crossroad Publishing)
- *Repenting of Religion: Turning from Judgment to the Love of God* by Gregory A. Boyd (Baker Books)
- *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God* by Skye Jethani (Thomas Nelson)

doctors to help the family understand the diagnosis and treatment, and many phone calls and visits to patiently counsel and comfort the parents, not to mention endless trips to the children's specialty hospital thirty miles away for chemotherapy treatments.

All through this, Scott and Laurie repeatedly demonstrated and spoke of God's amazing love to this sick young boy. As Laurie gently cared for Abdi in the waning weeks of his life, she read him a book about a popular professional soccer player who loves Jesus. The subsequent conversation enabled Abdi to respond to God's amazing love that he'd known through Scott and Laurie.



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3. In a small group of Christians wanting to grow in these practices
4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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**Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.**

# WHAT IS GOD'S LOVE LIKE?

## the **big idea**

God pursues us intentionally and sacrificially, seeking us out because of his fervent love and deep desire for connection.

## **ice breaker**

How would you describe “true love”?

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## **related Scripture**

*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

1 John 4:9-10 (NIV)

## **challenging wisdom**

*The hero of the story is God—and he loves you and me. God is the source of love and the initiator of love.... If God is the Pursuer, the Ageless Romancer, the Lover, then there has to be a Beloved, one who is the Pursued. This is our role in the story.*

– Brent Curtis and John Eldredge

## LOVE PURSUES US ON PURPOSE

As we think about how we came to know Jesus, we often describe ourselves as “seekers” or “explorers,” as if our spiritual journey is all about us—that we are the ones who are active, and God is out there passively waiting to be found (maybe even *hiding*). We may think that God is far off and disinterested—that he only cares about us if we initiate a relationship with him.

But the truth is that God pursues each one of us. We are less the “seekers” and more the “sought after” ones (Isaiah 62:12). God’s love is an active love; the thread running through Scripture reveals that God actively seeks us. From Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to Moses, to Ruth, to David, to a virgin girl named Mary, God sought them out. He demonstrated his love personally to each of them while he worked in their lives to carry out his plan motivated by love for the whole world. And then Jesus came from heaven to earth as God-in-the-flesh man. His mission was *to seek and to save the lost* (Luke 19:10, NIV).

God has always earnestly sought his people. Jeremiah 31:3 (NIV) quotes God as saying, “*I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.*” This is the nature of God. God is the one initiating, the one who takes the first step, even if we are not aware of it. He longs for us to respond to his promptings and invitation—and in that way, to seek him in return.

**1 DISCUSS ::** What is your response to the idea of God as the original “seeker”? Describe a time when you felt that God was wooing or pursuing you.

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God has been wooing us to himself since the beginning. In *The Sacred Romance*, Brent Curtis and John Eldredge

describe God as “the hero in love,” and us as the “Beloved,” the “Pursued.”<sup>1</sup> Here’s how God’s story is described in *The Message*:

*Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son. . . . Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living. . . . Ephesians 1:4-5, 11-12*

Yet Psalm 14:2-3 (NLT) says, “*The LORD looks down from heaven on the entire human race; he looks to see if anyone is truly wise, if anyone seeks God. But no, all have turned away.*”

To describe God’s passionate pursuit of us, pastor Max Lucado recounts a story about a runaway girl in his book *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*:

Longing to leave her poor Brazilian neighborhood, Christina wanted to see the world. Discontent with a home having only a pallet on the floor, . . . she dreamed of a better life in the city. One morning she slipped away, breaking her mother’s heart. Knowing what life on the streets would be like for her young, attractive daughter, Maria hurriedly packed to go find her. On her way to the bus stop she entered a drugstore to get one last thing. Pictures. She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures of herself. With her purse full of small black-and-white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro. Maria knew Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search. Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for street walkers or prostitutes. . . . And at each place she left her picture—taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note. . . .

It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth but spoke of pain and fear. . . . Her dream had become a

nightmare. A thousand times over she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet. . . . As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. . . . There on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina’s eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation. “Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn’t matter. Please come home.” She did.<sup>2</sup>

Our God lovingly pursues you, your friends, neighbors, colleagues, classmates, relatives. Just as he is a Shepherd, pursuing the one lost sheep, we are called to follow in his steps and do as he has done—in love, proactively and intentionally seek out the people who are often living desperate lives without him.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Share a time when you felt God prompting you to seek out someone to encourage, serve, love, or show kindness. Take a few minutes to think—who is God whispering for you to join him in “seeking after”?

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## LOVE PURSUES WITH PASSION

In her book *Deeply Loved*, Keri Wyatt Kent tells of a family who took in a foster child. The child was sweet, yet troubled. He could be charming at times, but at other times he would rage and act out. But this family chose to love him. At night, when they would tuck him into bed, they asked him the question they had always asked their other four children: “What does God say when he looks at you?” At first the boy did not know what to say. But these loving parents taught him to answer, “He says, ‘I sure do love that little boy!’” Soon, he would eagerly repeat this nightly catechism. He began to know and understand the incredible love that God had for him.

We all need the same thing in our lives—affirmations of God’s love. His love is not about our worthiness. God loves each of us because he created us. Nothing you can do will make God love you any more than he already does, and nothing you can do will make him love you less. He already

loves you infinitely. This kind of unconditional love is what people far from God are longing for.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Who do you know that needs an affirmation of God's no-strings-attached love? What are a few tangible ways you can give that affirmation?

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As God's beloved children, we can purposefully let his passion spill over into actions that communicate love to others. To them, we are the tangible expression of his love. And the message of divine love that we share through our lives will draw people to him. This can start as simply as noticing someone's need, providing a listening ear, greeting someone warmly, taking the initiative to engage someone in a conversation about God, or inviting someone into your home for coffee.

**4 DISCUSS ::** In the last three months, how has your understanding of being God's beloved child impacted the way you offer that love to people far from him?

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### LOVE PURSUES WITH SACRIFICE

In the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear plant meltdown in Japan, a massive cleanup of the hazardous site was required. A retired Japanese physicist invited other retired scientists to join him in offering their services to help clean up the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. Within four months, 400 men and women signed up. This "Skilled Veterans Corps" wanted to go in the place of young workers who were performing the cleanup. In an effort to protect the younger generation from radioactive exposure, these individuals were willing to face perilous radiation levels.

God's love is expressed in an even more heroic sacrifice.

Jesus, God the Son, left the comfort of heaven and the presence of the Father and became like us, willingly entering our contaminated world to save us from sin's fallout.

The Bible says that *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8, NIV). That word *demonstrates* is important. God doesn't just talk about love, or theorize that he might someday love you. He acts on it, demonstrates it—with a huge sacrifice!

He proves his love, not *after* we proved our worthiness, but *before*; while we were still stuck in our sinful actions, he loved us enough to die for us. He did this for all people—while they are still sinners, now. He offers his love to Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, hedonists, communists, terrorists, anarchists. Your coworkers, cousins, classmates. Everyone who will come to him. His love says: "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

**5 DISCUSS ::** Where do you sense God is prompting you to leave or to go in order to incarnate his love to someone?

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**6 PRACTICE ::** In the next week, what are three simple acts of love that you can express to three people who believe differently than you? If you do not know three people, what are three simple acts you can take to initiate those relationships?

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

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3. \_\_\_\_\_

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Spend some time this week journaling about the question, “What does God say when he looks at you?” Think about various seasons of your life (childhood, teens, young adulthood, etc.) and what your gut response would have been to that question in each season. What is it now? (Be honest.)

When you go to bed each night this week, ask yourself, *What does God say when he looks at me?*, and then answer it by filling in your name: “He says, I sure do love [your name]!” Say this out loud even if you don’t yet fully believe it. Let the truth transform your thinking.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

God loves us more than we can fathom. He initiates having a relationship with us as a model for us to follow. When we’re filled with understanding of his purposeful, passionate, sacrificial love for us, his love moves us to intentionally seek out people far from God, and to let them experience his love through us.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Bold Love* by Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III (NavPress)
- *Deeply Loved: 40 Ways in 40 Days to Experience the Love of Jesus* by Keri Wyatt Kent (Abingdon Press)
- *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* by James Bryan Smith (InterVarsity Press)
- *Love Does: Discover a Secretly Incredible Life in an Ordinary World* by Bob Goff (Thomas Nelson)
- *The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God* by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge (Thomas Nelson)

## QPlace STORY

Jeff and his family were admiring the beautiful Christmas decorations in the windows of the shops along busy State Street. As they browsed, Jeff realized that they were missing his two-year-old daughter, Lenna. She had been absorbed into the crowd and he could not find her. He felt an immediate intense rush of panic and energy, a hyper-focus to find her. His wife circled the other children and Jeff retraced their steps. In a flurry of purpose and passion, all he could think about was

finding his little girl. Pushing through the crowd of holiday strollers, he frantically searched for her tiny frame—hoping and praying to catch a glimpse of her coat or hair or face—anything to get her back in his arms. Then, as the anxiety and passion to find her grew inside him, he saw her, standing at one of the Christmas windows, nose pressed up against it, mesmerized by what was inside. Jeff ran over, scooped her up, and hugged her tightly, determined never to let her get lost again.



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**Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.**

# HOW CAN WE TRULY LOVE OTHERS?

## the **big** idea

God’s love for us is the source of our love for others.

### **ice breaker**

Tell about a time in your life—preferably before you were a Christian—when someone who was a Christ-follower showed love that made a strong impression on you. Share another time when someone’s lack of Christ-like love made it hard for you to accept his or her message.

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### **related Scripture**

*“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

Matthew 22:36-40 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*It is our actions towards others that separate Christianity from philosophy. It is tying loving God to loving our neighbors as ourselves that puts legs to our faith.*

– Rick Rusaw

*The art of love is not merely in feeding your enemy, but in feeding your enemy what he desperately needs.*

– Dan Allender

## LETTING GOD FILL YOUR TANK

Your nutritional intake provides fuel for your body to use for activities. If you take in calories without using them, your body accumulates that fuel as fat and you grow less and less healthy. Similarly, our souls are not designed to take in the spiritual nutrition of God’s love and not turn that outward in loving action toward others. In addition, we cannot expect to love others purely if we are not being nourished by God’s love. In order to love others, we must tap into the source of love—in fact, to Love himself. As theologian Elton Trueblood writes, “What we need is not intellectual theorizing or even preaching but a demonstration. There is only one way of turning loyally to Christ, and that is by loving others with the great love of God.”<sup>1</sup>

So our active love for others flows out of hearts that have first been filled with God’s love. In Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus instructs with this principle:

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

God doesn’t command us to “try harder” to get our cold hearts to love more. Instead, he invites us to have our hearts transformed by loving him, so that love for others follows as the natural outflow. When a bucket is filled to overflowing and water keeps pouring in, the bucket doesn’t have to “try” to make everything around it get wet; it can’t help but slosh all over whatever is nearby.

**1 DISCUSS ::** What aspect of God’s love most fills your heart to overflowing? Lately, in what ways have you experienced God’s love?

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If we truly appreciate and understand God’s love, we increasingly love what he loves—other people; both those who are close to him and those who are separated from him. As a result, our focus realigns to include loving and caring for others as a way of life. Paul’s instruction in Galatians reflects Jesus’ teaching:

*Do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Galatians 5:13-14 (NIV)*

This is not a “suggestion to take under advisement.” Loving your neighbor is foundational to the Christian faith. Yet sadly, this is not what Christians are known for in the world.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Who do you think of as your “neighbor”? How can you love your “neighbor” in practical ways?

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## LOVING PEOPLE WHO ARE DIFFERENT FROM YOU

These days, the word *love* has lost its value. Saying we love someone, or even feeling kind thoughts about them, is not really love. Love may sometimes feel, but it always acts. The Bible repeats this truth over and over. “*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8); and, “*For God so loved the world that he gave . . .*” (John 3:16); and finally, “. . . *faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead*” (James 2:17) (NIV). Action accompanies real love, but action can take very different forms as we interact with people widely different from us.

In his book *The Magnificent Defeat*, theologian Frederick Buechner provides this perspective:

The love for equals is a human thing—of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles. The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing—the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice,

the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints. And then there is the love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured’s love for the torturer. This is God’s love. It conquers the world.<sup>2</sup>

**3 DISCUSS ::** What strikes you most about this quote describing love? Explain.

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Loving our neighbor means loving those who are lovable or who are like us, those less fortunate or more fortunate than us, and also our enemies.

Let’s face it, loving someone less fortunate can be difficult. We are more prone to judge them or not even notice them. But Jesus challenges us to be generous with our time and resources to those in need—whether it’s a person who is lacking basic necessities, or a person who has plenty but is spiritually bankrupt. We’re called to love people across every economic, spiritual, and ethnic spectrum.

There will be times when love may cost us more than we anticipated—it may require time and attention we’d rather use elsewhere; we may feel scared or pushed out of our comfort zone; we may even have to make a sacrifice that is painful. But when we keep in mind how much God loves us, loving others makes sense. As pastor Francis Chan writes, “Jesus is saying that we show tangible love for God in how we care for the poor and those who are suffering. He expects us to treat the poor and the desperate as if they were Christ Himself.”<sup>3</sup>

Many of us have lifestyles that insulate us from “the poor and desperate.” Rather than absolving us, perhaps God calls us to deliberately put ourselves in settings, neighborhoods, or social gatherings where we can get to know and love those who are not like us.

**4 DISCUSS ::** Respond to James 2:7 that says faith without action is dead. What specific risk might you take to extend practical love to “neighbors” who are less fortunate than you?

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Loving people more fortunate than you is not easy either. How can you love the person who was promoted when you were overlooked, or the person who is healthy when you are struggling with chronic pain, or the person who scored higher than you on the exam, or the person who has the newest clothing fashion, technological device, or electronic gadget? How can you love the person who looks like they have it all, without judgment or critique?

With God's help, you can celebrate their good fortune without envy, jealousy, malice, or ulterior motive. In fact, we can reach out, as Gabe Lyons, founder of Q Ideas, writes, ". . . befriending people through authentic relationships where love is the only agenda."<sup>4</sup>

**5 DISCUSS ::** In your daily life, how can you bless (not judge) people who are more fortunate than you (healthier, wealthier, more successful, more popular, with more academic achievements)?

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## LOVING YOUR ENEMIES

Picture Jesus speaking to the crowd:

*"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."* Luke 6:27-28 (NIV)

What! Are you kidding me? Jesus is asking us to love the people who do us harm? This command seems impossible to practice. Yet, history records many stories of Jesus' followers making the sacrifice to obey this teaching—martyrs through the centuries, Holocaust prisoners, Chinese underground church pastors, Muslim converts to Christ, and many more with less dramatic examples of this self-sacrificial love.

Pastor Francis Chan challenges us, "There has to be more to our faith than friendliness, politeness, and even kindness (Luke 6:32-36). . . . True faith is loving a person after he has hurt you."

Consider the story of Charles Carl Roberts. He was a milk truck driver who tied up and shot ten Amish schoolgirls ages 6 to 14 in their Pennsylvania classroom in October 2006, killing five of them before turning the gun on himself. Shortly after the massacre, the same Amish community donated money to the gunman's widow and said they wanted

to forgive him. To the watching world, this kind of love elicits questions, curiosity, and amazement. It demands an explanation.

Most of us don't directly experience dramatic scenarios of tragedy and evil. But we do experience internal resistance when we engage in conversation with people whose beliefs or worldviews are in opposition to ours. We have a simple choice to make in these interactions. We can choose to love people with differing opinions, listen to them, and seek to understand—or we can devalue them, creating an enemy. Gabe Lyons states it clearly: "Followers of Christ in a pluralistic society must be willing and able to engage those they disagree with in constructive conversations." After all, "How can we love someone we don't know or understand?"<sup>5</sup>

**6 DISCUSS ::** Describe someone in your life now with whom you disagree or are in conflict.

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How have you thought about that person or treated that person?

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What ways have you found to show love to him or her?

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**7 PRACTICE ::** As a group, read Luke 6:27-28 (printed in the left column). Follow Jesus' instruction by praying for your "enemies." As a group, take time to pray for the people in your life with whom you are in conflict, whom you avoid or who avoid you, who disagree with you, who dislike you, who have harmed you or those you love, or who have done you some wrong. After praying, discuss the experience together.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Following Jesus' outline in Luke 6, each day this week continue praying for someone who is not an ally or friend. Ask God for specific ways to bless this person with words and with actions. Take risks to follow through, obediently following any prompting of God. Love extravagantly, in the way God loves you. Share your experience with someone in the group.

Note: In a toxic relationship, we need to understand that loving isn't the same as remaining in danger. "Though we are called to be reconciled, we are not called to be abused or to be repeatedly harmed by someone." (James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010, 119)

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

God's love fills us up and enables us to freely love our "peer" neighbor, our "less fortunate" neighbor, our "more fortunate" neighbor and our "adversarial" neighbor. By our love, we will distinguish ourselves as followers of Jesus who live counter to the cultural norm.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Bold Love* by Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III (NavPress)
- *Crazy Love* by Francis Chan (David C. Cook)
- *The Good and Beautiful Community* by James Bryan Smith (InterVarsity Press)
- *The Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Claiborne (Zondervan)
- *Love Does: Discover a Secretly Incredible Life in an Ordinary World* by Bob Goff (Thomas Nelson)
- *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* by Fr. Gregory Boyle (Free Press)

## QPlace STORY

Sonny had been through a difficult divorce. He had been deeply hurt by his ex-wife, Keri. A few years later, Sonny and Ellen were married, and then Sonny came to know Jesus and felt compelled to forgive Keri. Slowly, over time, Sonny and Ellen demonstrated forgiving love to Keri. Together they reached out to her during inter-family events, watching for ways to build connections and trust. More than fifteen years went by, and despite Sonny and Ellen's honesty and openness in sharing their faith journey, Keri was not interested.

Then, Keri was hospitalized with a debilitating bone disease. Ellen went to spend time with Keri in the hospital and kept showing up to

give support, encouragement, and love through Keri's difficult recovery process. The diagnosis indicated little chance of a full recovery, and Keri clearly felt that she had little to live for, knowing that she would physically never be the same. Ellen began once again to share how she had experienced God's work in her life, and also the hope and power she knew that God had for Keri, even in this circumstance. Finally Keri began to understand the love of God, and she surrendered her life to this forgiving and loving Father.



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# HOW CAN WE LOVE PEOPLE WHO ARE HURTING?

## the **big idea**

Love means being there for people who are hurting.

### **ice breaker**

Are you the kind of person who goes to a funeral or visits people in the hospital? Why or why not?

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### **related Scripture**

*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.* Romans 12:15 (NIV)

*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"* John 11:33-36 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*He didn't give us a placebo or a pill or good advice. He gave us himself. He came. He entered space and time and suffering. He came, like a lover. Love seeks above all intimacy, presence, togetherness. . . . Remove Jesus and the knowledge of God is questionable. If the knowledge of God is questionable, trusting this unknown God becomes questionable. . . . Suffering is the evidence against God, the reason not to trust him. Jesus is the evidence for God, the reason to trust him.*

– Peter Kreeft

## IN THIS LIFE THERE WILL BE SORROW

"Hi! How are you?"

"Fine."

This typical casual interchange happens countless times every day. And yet we know people are not always "fine." Lurking under the surface of many people's veneer is grief, pain, heartache.

Jesus experienced sadness, sorrow, pain, and suffering. He chose to come down from heaven to be with us in our broken world as Immanuel—God with us (Matthew 1:23). Jesus also entered into these emotions when other people experienced them. Jesus mourned with those who mourn, modeling a loving response to grief. For example, when Jesus arrived at Bethany to find that his friend Lazarus had died,

seeing his sister Mary and her friends weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and then, in grief himself, he wept.

**DISCUSS ::** Imagine how Jesus grieved the loss of his friend and had compassion on Mary in her grief. Describe more of the dialogue that might have taken place.

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Like Jesus, we can be bearers of hope to the hurting. The lie many succumb to is that faith and grief do not coexist. Yet in Genesis 50:1, Joseph grieves when Jacob dies, throwing

himself on his father and weeping over him. Joseph's grief was not from a lack of faith but an honest emotional response.

In 2 Samuel 12:16-17, King David grieves over the illness of his son and his own guilt of sin. David's sorrow was an appropriate response to his moral failure and the suffering of his son.

*David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them. (NIV)*

**2 DISCUSS ::** How can grief and faith coexist? Is grief "good" in your perspective? Why or why not?

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## WE HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW GOD'S LOVE

Grief, disappointment, and trauma can all be profoundly disorienting, numbing a person's consciousness and clouding their ability to think clearly. In his helpful book *When the Bottom Drops Out*,<sup>1</sup> pastor Rob Bugh speaks personally about the grief he experienced in the illness and death of his wife, Carol. Pastor Bugh shares that the "practical ministries" extended to him were of incredible value. Hurt shuts down people's ability to cope. Forgetful, preoccupied, and reeling amidst the strain of the emotional situation, hurting people need practical help—Jesus with dirty feet. "My friend Steve cut my grass week after week. Dan kept our older cars and anything mechanical running. Chuck and his wife, Pat, prayed and prayed. . . . Jeff basically ran our house, keeping track of our kids and paying all our bills."<sup>2</sup>

As followers of Christ, we can be there for hurting people. We can recognize our own feelings of discomfort, helplessness, and vulnerability in these situations and choose to push past them in love. We can run *to* hurting people, not from them.

Time does not heal all wounds. There are hurts that a person may never "get over." For healing, God chooses to use us, his people, as the primary agents to minister to hurting

people. Coming alongside those who are hurting can be one of the most significant things you will ever do in your life.

**3 DISCUSS ::** When people you know are hurting, do you run to them or away from them? Explain.

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## PRACTICAL WAYS TO LOVE SOMEONE IN CRISIS

Here are five helpful practices to love a person struggling through a difficult time in life—experiencing grief, divorce, job loss, chronic or terminal illness, or some other life crisis.

### 1. Don't Speak, Just Listen

Silence dignifies a person's hurt because sometimes pain is too deep for words. This is the ministry of presence, being "with" someone—listening a lot, speaking a little, and bringing the presence of Christ in you alongside the person who is in pain. Do not be afraid of sitting quietly with someone in their heartache. When Job suffered a succession of disasters, his friends came and sat with him in silence. *Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was (Job 2:13, NIV).* Ancient Jewish tradition refers to this act of mourning as "sitting Shiva." True compassion is expressed through presence, silence, and human companionship.

When you are empathetic, you identify with and feel with the other person, coming alongside the hurting person gently and quietly. Studies have concluded that the two most "helpful" listening behaviors when interacting with the bereaved include (1) providing the opportunity for them to vent, and (2) just "being there."<sup>3</sup>

**4 DISCUSS ::** During a difficult time in your life when you were struggling, did someone come alongside you? Were they helpful? Not helpful? How and why?

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### 2. Use Gentle, Sensitive Words

When you do speak, let it be from your heart, not from your head—don't try to offer nuggets of wisdom. One of the best

<sup>1</sup> Q Place gratefully acknowledges that significant content for this session came from Robert Bugh's book *When the Bottom Drops Out* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2011). Used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Bugh, *When the Bottom Drops Out* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2011), 144.

<sup>3</sup> D. R. Lehman, J. H. Ellard, and C. B. Wortman, "Social support for the bereaved: Recipients' and providers' perspectives on what is helpful," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* Volume 54(4) (August 1986), 438-446.

things you can say to someone who is struggling is simply “I’m sorry.” Ask good questions; don’t offer trite answers.

Hurting people need you to acknowledge that their pain is real. As poet Denise Levertov writes,

*To speak of sorrow  
works upon it  
moves it from its  
crouched place barring  
the way to and from the soul’s hall.<sup>4</sup>*

To acknowledge their pain, to “speak of their sorrow” gives them permission to grieve and allows them to move forward with healing of their “soul’s hall.” Follow the wisdom from Proverbs 25:11 (ESV): *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.* These kinds of words are gentle, informed, timely, appropriate. If the hurting person is feeling hopeless and despairing, let them know that you “will hope for them” if they cannot hope right now. Measure your words and avoid careless, inappropriate comments or questions provoked by your own awkwardness in the situation.

Here are some helpful guidelines for when you do feel that it is right to speak:

- Use phrases like “I don’t know what to say.” “I can’t imagine how difficult this is.” “This must be awful.”
- Do not offer platitudes. (Examples: “You have so much to be thankful for.” “It’s time for you to move on.”)
- Don’t minimize the problem. (Examples: “You can always have another one.” “You had many good years together.”)
- Do not give unsolicited advice. (Examples: “Now that your husband is gone, you should consider getting a dog.” “In ten years you will not even remember this.”)
- Do not claim to know how the person feels.<sup>5</sup>

**5 PRACTICE ::** Partner up with another person and describe a time when a friend or family member was hurting. Role play with your partner a conversation you might have with that person, incorporating the suggestions listed above. After a few minutes, change roles and repeat the exercise.

### 3. Avoid Theological Pronouncements

Be very careful about what you say spiritually. Do not offer pat Christian answers. (“God needed him more than you did,” or “He’s in a better place now.”) Hold on to impressions

from God loosely (“God told me that . . .”) and time will prove them right or wrong. Statements that may be true can come across as heartless, thoughtless, and trite. (“God works all things together for good.”) A time will come when theological truth from Scripture may bring comfort, but not when the pain is intense. And even when sharing Scripture becomes appropriate, be sure that’s not all that you say or do.

### 4. Show Up!

Pastor Bugh encourages us to “Err on the side of involvement for the hurting.” Show up for them again and again and again. If you don’t show up, they will never know you care. *Love never gives up*—it shows up. *Love never loses faith*—it gives faith. *Love is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance* (1 Corinthians 13:7, NLT). Love by going to the funeral home and sitting quietly in support. Love by visiting in the hospital and offering a prayer. Love by stopping by the house and providing a meal or offering to watch the kids. Love by dropping by the office and expressing your concern.

### 5. Look to Jesus

“Gently remind yourself and others of God’s sovereignty . . . as a balm to heal the wounded. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help you know when to remind people of these truths.”<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 12:2 (NASB) says to fix *our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. . . .*

Also, remember that *The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit* (Psalm 34:18, NIV). Direct your thoughts and theirs to Jesus by offering to pray that they would be able to sense God’s nearness.

**6 DISCUSS ::** Which one of these five practices is easiest for you? Which one is most difficult? Explain your answer.

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Grief is inevitable in this fallen world filled with pain and loss. Often, we want to push it to the fringes. We tend to avoid it as much as possible. Yet grief properly expressed is good and necessary. Pain, suffering, grief— these are probably the most common of human experiences. Like Jesus, we can show love in practical and profound ways to hurting people.

<sup>4</sup> Denise Levertov, “To Speak” *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2002), 65.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Camille Wortman, Ph.D., *This Emotional Life: Offering Support to the Bereaved: What Not to Say*, <http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/blogs/offering-support-bereaved-what-not-say>.

<sup>6</sup> Rob Bugh, *When the Bottom Drops Out*, 162.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Pray throughout the next five days that God would reveal someone in your life who is experiencing grief, pain, or difficulty, and that he would show you a specific need that you would be able to fill. As you go about your week, watch for that person and then do one practical thing to ease the heaviness of his or her situation, following the five ways to love a person in crisis.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

By showing up in physical and practical ways, we incarnate Christ's love to hurting people, helping to heal their pain and ease their burden in Christ's name. Your quiet and consistent witness will speak volumes about his love to those who are seeking God and long for his comfort.

## QPlace STORY

Late one fall evening, Teresa, four months pregnant, and her husband, Preston, were driving to visit her parents several hours away. Their two-year-old son, Joshua, was peacefully sleeping in his car seat. Preston, a Good Samaritan by nature, pulled over to help a motorist who had accidentally hit wildlife on the freeway. As Preston stood on the shoulder of the road using his cell phone to call for help, another motorist suddenly swerved into his path to avoid hitting the dead animal in the right lane. Preston was struck and killed.

Their best friends, Katie and Jack, were already in bed for the night when they received the desperate phone call from Teresa. Immediately, they packed up their own young child in the family car and drove two hours to the scene of the accident to support Teresa through the difficult decisions of that horrible evening. The subsequent weeks and months were a blur of grief and sadness for the young widowed mother.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart: How to Relate to Those Who Are Suffering* by Kenneth C. Haugk (Stephens Ministries)
- *Lament for a Son* by Nicholas Wolterstorff (Wm. B. Eerdmans)
- *When the Bottom Drops Out* by Robert Bugh (Tyndale House)

Teresa clung to her friends for support. Katie babysat Teresa's son, went out to coffee with her grieving friend, listened to her talk about the gut-wrenching pain of losing her young husband, prayed with and for her, and showed countless acts of love toward her dear friend. Jack also helped Teresa with household repairs and took little Joshua out for some "guy time." Katie and Jack both knew that being there for their friend was critical.

Many people from their church brought meals to Teresa, helped her navigate the insurance paperwork, provided financial support, and met many needs that arose as a result of this tragedy.

While Teresa could not understand why God would allow this to happen, she could see the hand of God in providing for her family through the many people who supported and loved her.



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# The Art of Welcoming

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**6.1 WHY WELCOME?**

**6.2 HOW CAN WE OVERCOME BARRIERS TO WELCOMING?**

**6.3 HOW CAN WE CREATE A SAFE PLACE?**

**6.4 HOW CAN WE WELCOME INTO COMMUNITY?**





# WHY WELCOME?

## the **big** idea

Welcoming connects people into relationship.

### ice breaker

Describe a time when you felt welcomed—or not welcomed—by someone, and what impact that had on you.

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### related **Scripture**

*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

Luke 15:1-2 (NIV)

### challenging **wisdom**

*Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment... Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of chance to find his own...*

– Henri Nouwen

## WHY IS WELCOMING IMPORTANT?

In the summer before eighth grade, Mary’s family moved to a new town in Ohio where she would be attending a new parochial school in the fall. On the first day of school, as she walked into her classroom, Mary was nervous about making friends and not knowing anyone. When it was lunchtime, she headed to the cafeteria with money in hand, but unknown to Mary, there was no food service offered at this school. Hungry and feeling isolated without a single friend to help her, Mary started to cry.

Her new English teacher, Sister Pauline, noticed Mary was upset and asked her what was wrong. When Mary told her she hadn’t brought a lunch and there was no food to purchase, Sister Pauline took Mary to the teachers’ lunchroom and promptly made her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, gave her milk and an apple, and then took her back to the cafeteria where she introduced Mary to three of her eighth grade classmates. She asked if Mary could sit with them for lunch.

By the end of lunch, Mary had made three new friends.

They remained her closest friends throughout the eighth grade. Sister Pauline had welcomed Mary to her new school and became a gateway to a wonderful school year through one simple act of welcoming and kindness.

It is hard to overstate the impact that a genuinely warm welcome can have in a person’s life. Welcoming someone bridges them from being a vulnerable outsider to being connected in relationship. When you accept and include someone, you lay the initial groundwork for a relationship to thrive and grow. Conversely, by not welcoming someone, you shut down a person’s interest or willingness to engage relationally.

**1 DISCUSS ::** On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = low and 10 = high), how would you rate your own welcoming skills? Explain.

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Welcoming is simply the act of showing unconditional acceptance to people without any expectations of reciprocation. When you welcome people into your life and activities, you are physically reflecting Christ’s love and acceptance. When people experience the warmth of your welcome, they are drawn to it, as they would be to a light in the darkness or a fire on a chilly night. When they have a taste, like a sample of savory food, they want more. This is an action that speaks to any culture and across any language, race, or religious divide. In this way, we are following Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 5 to be light and salt to people we know.

### GOD WELCOMES US

Examples of God’s abundant welcome flow throughout Scripture. From the Creator’s lavish preparation of the Garden of Eden, to the Shepherd’s inviting presence in Psalm 23, to the Savior’s open-armed readiness to gather in the excluded, God takes the initiative to draw people near. His ultimate welcome, of course, came by means of his ultimate sacrifice, so that we could come into relationship with him even though we had gone our own way.

Luke 15:1-2 (NIV) reveals a fascinating scene: *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

In response to the Pharisees’ criticism and in defense of his relentless welcome, Jesus tells three stories, culminating in the powerful parable of the Prodigal Son. In the story, the son had demanded his inheritance and had become a disgrace, squandering the entire amount. Yet when he came to his senses, he found his father waiting for him:

*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

*The son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”*

*But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.*

Luke 15:20-24 (NIV)

The robe, ring, sandals, and feast were all signs of position and the father’s acceptance. We can imagine that the robe was a long robe of distinction, the ring was a signet ring of authority, the sandals represented sonship (slaves went barefoot), and the fattened calf indicated the momentous occasion—all part of the father’s abundant welcome.

But the story was not complete. In a final clever twist of plot to address the Pharisees’ accusation—that he was welcoming sinners—Jesus adds intrigue to the parable and includes a character who does not represent the heart of the father.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Read Luke 15:25-32. What are the older son’s actions? What characterizes his attitude?

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What connections do you see between this part of the story and the account that immediately precedes Jesus’ parables (15:1-2)?

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Why do you think this story of the Prodigal Son is so profound? What does it tell you about God’s nature?

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How has God extended his welcome in tangible ways to you? What impact has that had on your life?

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### ASPECTS OF WELCOMING

God the Father extends a welcome to everyone. When we are willing to welcome like the Father, we reflect his unconditional acceptance. The challenge we face is knowing how to welcome others, communicating genuine acceptance with nothing expected in return. Welcoming may come very naturally to some people based on their personality or on how they grew up, but for most people it is something that requires practice and intentionality.

How can *you* become one of those welcoming people who provides the kind of full welcome that we all desire when we are in new situations? To keep it simple, what if you consider welcoming as something that happens best when you are keenly aware of maximizing three welcoming aspects—your *face*, your *space*, and your *place*? Let’s briefly unpack each one.

**1. Your FACE**

Welcoming starts with your facial expression. Have you ever heard the sarcastic comment: “If you are so happy to see me, why haven’t you told your face?” Our attitude and disposition of having a welcoming spirit should be reflected on our faces. A smile and warm look directly in someone’s eyes goes a long way toward helping someone feel welcomed by you. When you frequently encounter people and greet them in this way, they will begin to remember your face; you have begun to lay the groundwork for the connection to deepen.

**2. Your SPACE**

This is the nonphysical environment around you that includes the impression of openness you express nonverbally to others. You can offer people a safe and caring presence, free of judgment. Do you present yourself in a way that invites people to know you or be known by you?

**3. Your PLACE**

This is the physical environment—your home, office, or car. When you have a comfortable place for people to meet in, it makes people more relaxed and accepted. Do the physical spaces that you control provide a way for people to feel instantly comfortable and welcomed?

Welcoming can be practiced everywhere. Your home, workplace, school, and neighborhood all offer opportunities to extend a welcome both to the people you know best and to those you don’t know at all yet.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Which one of the three welcoming aspects described here is easiest for you?

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Which one do you think needs the most improvement? Explain.

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**4 DISCUSS ::** Pair up with someone.

- Think back to the ice breaker question. How did the person’s face, space, and place impact how you felt welcomed—or not welcomed?

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- Briefly discuss how you would welcome someone in one of your everyday activities or in a specific place such as your home, work, or school. Think through all three aspects (face, space, and place).

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- Discuss what new things you learned about welcoming people. How could these welcoming practices build relational trust and potentially open up conversation? What can you change to make people feel more welcomed?

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**5 DISCUSS ::** Describe a simple, doable welcoming practice that fits your personality in each of these three categories:

- your everyday life
- your work
- your neighborhood

What challenges do you find in welcoming people well? What steps can you take to overcome those challenges?

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

This week, practice welcoming at least one time in each of the three aspects: your face, your space, and your place. Write down your experience each time.

Partner with someone else in the group and share your observations by phone, email, or in person. Also, share with each other anything that you have noticed happening inside of *you* as you have been welcoming to others. Be sure to encourage and celebrate every attempt! *Remember:* Welcoming is a free gift—don't expect anything in return.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

We extend God's grace and love to others when we welcome them. We've been graciously welcomed by God to be his children. He wants us to extend that same welcome to others in our everyday lives—at church, on the train, at the office, in the yard, on the bus, in the store, at the laundromat, at a restaurant, in our home. We welcome people when our own faces, our personal spaces, and our physical places show grace and love.

## QPlace STORY

Larry worked in a busy, stressful line of work. His days were filled with frequent interruptions as people regularly stopped by his office to discuss issues and ask questions. To deter these frequent visitors, Larry positioned his desk and computer so that his back was facing anyone who entered his office. The clear, yet unspoken message Larry conveyed was "I'm busy, don't bother me."

Yet as a believer, Larry heard the insistent, convicting whisper of God's Spirit asking if this desk arrangement demonstrated the Father's welcoming heart. It took a while, but Larry listened—and then rearranged his office. With the desk now facing the door, Larry intentionally greeted visitors who came by and created a more inviting office space.



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# HOW CAN WE OVERCOME BARRIERS TO WELCOMING?

## the **big** idea

We can understand and address barriers that keep us from openly welcoming people who believe differently.

### **ice breaker**

Describe a humorous time when you welcomed someone into your home, social group, or an activity and the situation took a turn for the worse.

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### **related Scripture**

*Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. . . . I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.*

1 Corinthians 9:19, 22 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*To convert hostility into hospitality requires the creation of the friendly empty space where we can reach out to our fellow human beings and invite them to a new relationship. This conversion is an inner event that cannot be manipulated but must develop from within. Just as we cannot force a plant to grow but can take away the weeds and stones which prevent its development, so we cannot force anyone to such a personal and intimate change of heart, but we can offer the space where such a change can take place.*

– Henri Nouwen

## **FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE, OR FACE**

When confronted with a predator, animals respond instinctively with the “fight or flight response.” This instinct is a gift from God to keep his creatures safe. However, when we as humans find ourselves outside our comfort zone in a relationship, that same instinct leads us to withdraw or to go on the offensive. Both are responses of fear, rather than love. This can easily happen in conversations with people expressing different beliefs, worldviews, or opinions. Instead of responding in love, fear gets the best of us and we can become argumentative or else just pull away. Yet God has designed us with the capacity to *reason*, not just *react*, so that we can take action in a deliberately loving way.

Sometimes we neither flee nor fight, but merely *freeze*, unable to say or do anything. This, too, is an instinctive response we see in nature. Like “a deer in the headlights,” we’re temporarily unable to move.

But this response is not helpful either. After a few uncomfortable encounters, we can find ourselves avoiding people who believe differently about God, or at least avoiding conversations about God with them (and they probably avoid us for the same reason!).

*Flight, fight, and freeze* all inhibit our ability to make a relational connection. But God calls us to love others—and not just people who are like us. In order to do that, we will have to find a way to love in spite of our instinctive reactions.

The alternative is to *face*—to move toward another person in loving engagement. This will require taking an honest look at the barriers we erect that keep us stuck. The value in doing this is enormous; it will allow us to forge ahead into open and meaningful relationships. In so doing, we become more loving, and might possibly in time introduce people to the God who loves them.

**1 DISCUSS ::** What is your typical pattern when handling difficult conversations with people who believe differently than you—fight against, flee from, freeze in place, or face directly? Why do you think you generally respond this way?

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## FIVE BARRIERS TO WELCOMING

While our core instincts can get in the way of building relationships, we also hide behind other barriers. No one aspires to be unfriendly or unwelcoming, yet we don't always invite others in, particularly when those "others" are different from us. Most barriers are, at their heart, fear-based; but once we are no longer blind to their presence, we can begin to overcome the fears that support them, allowing us to create an environment where people feel welcomed. Let's take a look at five of these barriers.

### 1. Busyness

Our culture has made multitasking and busyness normal, even admirable. But the pace of our lives wrecks our best intentions. We say we want to reach out to others in love, but we simply have no time to build relationships. In fact, we barely have time for the people we already know and love. The words "I'm busy" are often code for "I'm important." How much of your busyness is driven by your desire for significance? Without margin in your life, people can be viewed as an interruption. It will take humility and intention to slow down and make space to welcome.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Take a good look at your schedule. What have you said "yes" to that is keeping you from taking time for people who need to know God's love? How much have you involved the Holy Spirit and built margin into your schedule?

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**3 DISCUSS ::** What can you delegate or simply stop doing? Are you willing to put aside your agenda to be interruptible, or intentionally choose activities where you will get to know people who believe differently?

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### 2. Shallowness

Many of us have become accustomed to surface-level relationships; that's what we experience in the workplace, at school, with our neighbors, and sometimes even among our friends. We may wish for deeper connections, but we're not even sure how to get there. Perhaps because we've been burned before or no one ever modeled authentic community for us, we skim the surface of relationships. Frankly, we lack relational depth ourselves—or we fear it—so we're unable or unwilling to show vulnerability, especially toward seekers.

**4 PRACTICE ::** Make a list of relational risks you'd like to take. For example, tell someone you appreciate them, or share something that might be misunderstood, such as feeling sad or inadequate. Commit to taking one little risk each day this week, and journal about any positive results. Not everyone will be ready to go deeper with you, so pray and watch for opportunities. The goal is to experience why risk-taking is worth it.

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### 3. Competitiveness

Like the other barriers to welcoming, competitiveness is often driven by fear. Afraid that we won't measure up, we adopt a "win-lose" mentality, and try to "beat" or outsmart others in some way. Our competitiveness comes out in conversation with spiritual seekers when we think that because we know the truth, we are somehow better than they are. Competition and comparison destroy the potential for community and connection.

To remedy this inclination, be intentionally curious and open. You can learn something from people who believe differently from you. Consider the possibility that other people's questions or opinions might cause you to think more

deeply and help your faith grow. Consciously choose to let go of the need to “win” before you even start a conversation. Memorize this verse and ask God to help you change your approach: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others* (Philippians 2:3-4, NIV).

**5 DISCUSS ::** Describe a time when you felt superior to someone because you knew more than they did. How did you behave? How did that person respond?

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#### 4. Defensiveness

The barrier of defensiveness is, ironically, offensive! When we feel insecure, we typically don't engage in open dialogue. Around non-Christians, we may fear they will judge us, or misunderstand us, or look down on us for our faith. When we lack a firm foundation of faith and identity in Christ, we'll be vulnerable to defensiveness, and it will actually push people away.

To overcome this obstacle, relax! Trust in God and develop your own relationship with him. Intentionally spend time with nonbelievers to get past the stereotypes you have. They are not “out to get you” but are full of fears and doubts—just as you are. Take yourself less seriously. The Bible promises that when we enter into relationship with God through Jesus, we become new people: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* (2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV). You don't have to prove anything.

#### 5. Selfishness

The default mode of every human being is to ask, “What's in it for me?” If we think engaging with unbelievers is too much work, we won't do it. We often choose relationships based on what we can get, rather than what we can give. But as people who are loved by God, we're called to serve others and show them that same love.

The antidote to selfishness is to serve others. Here's a little known secret about serving selflessly: It brings joy! When you discover an opportunity to serve someone, do it. Volunteer somewhere, like a school or a shelter. Or, every day simply try to fill one need that you notice.

**6 DISCUSS ::** Which of these five barriers most often blocks you from quality relationships with those who believe differently? What do you think might be the benefit of working to overcome it? What specific steps can you take toward that end?

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### IDENTIFY WITHOUT LOSING YOUR IDENTITY

The apostle Paul's identity in Christ was rock-solid, and in that security he sought common ground with people who didn't yet know Jesus. As he explained to the Corinthian church, when he was with Jews, he didn't make an issue about his freedom from the Mosaic Law; when he was with Gentiles, he didn't use Jewish terminology that would have been foreign to his listeners or flaunt his knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). Wherever he was, he purposely put aside his own personal freedom in order to relate well with people.

To “become like” people who are far from God does not mean adopting their patterns of sinful behavior or coarse language. But within our identity as followers of Jesus, it might mean paying more attention to our language and behavior—speaking in a way that makes sense to people we're spending time with, and putting aside our personal preferences in order to show respect for their background and interests.

Paul was also remarkably transparent about his own weaknesses; and in every instance, his weakness or suffering led inevitably to a chance to reveal how God was working in his life (Romans 7:14-25). So many sensitive aspects of our humanity—desire for acceptance, aspirations for achievement, or the need to feel secure—are common to all people. Being willing to admit weakness opens doors to make it safe for others to share vulnerably, and to open an earnest conversation about the reality of our relationship with God.

**7 DISCUSS ::** What comes to mind when you think about admitting your struggles with unbelieving friends? What would it look like for you to follow Paul's example of “becoming like” unbelievers, but not falling into sinful patterns of behavior?

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Consider the barrier to welcoming that you identified in #7. Recall a time when it adversely impacted your relationship with a seeker. Ask God to reveal why this barrier has sway in your life and write out a prayer about how you will address this particular barrier. Share your plan with a group member and encourage each other in the upcoming week.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

In order to welcome people with different beliefs, we need to recognize our typical response to people with differing worldviews and the barriers that keep us from connecting well with them. As we learn to identify with people while still being true to our new nature in Christ, we will have the opportunity to share his love naturally in a spirit of openness, grace, and truth.

## QPlace STORY

Melanie was in the middle of a big project at work and her college son was home on break when her friend Aida called. Aida was deeply concerned about her friend Lillian, whose husband had just left her for another woman. Knowing that Melanie had helped people connect with God in times of crisis, Aida asked Melanie to spend time with Lillian. But Melanie hesitated. She didn't know Lillian at all and really would have preferred not to get involved. At the moment, life was busy and overwhelming, and quite frankly, she just didn't have any time to spare.

But then Lillian herself started calling Melanie and wanted to get together. Due to Lillian's persistence, Melanie agreed to meet with her for an hour. Lillian came over, and within thirty minutes, Melanie

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *The Art of Neighboring* by Jay Pathak and David Runyon (Baker Books)
- *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them* by John Ortberg (Zondervan)
- *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* by Henri Nouwen (Doubleday)

realized that God was at work in Lillian's life and was inviting her to relinquish her heavy burdens and allow Jesus to carry them.

When Melanie suggested to this broken woman that Jesus could be trusted to be her friend through this crisis and in all aspects of her life, to Melanie's surprise, Lillian agreed without hesitation. Then she invited Jesus into her life and asked him to clean it up, believing that he was God and could give her what she needed most.

Melanie's barriers of busyness and selfishness almost prevented her from meeting with Lillian and revealing to her the source of all lasting peace and joy. When Lillian went home, Melanie turned back to her day with a profound sense of humility and gratitude to God for what he had done.



**Getting Ready:** Noticing, Praying, Listening  
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2. In a triad of facilitators getting ready to launch a Q Place
3. In a small group of Christians wanting to grow in these practices
4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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***Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.***

# HOW CAN WE CREATE A SAFE PLACE?

## the **big** idea

When you open up your heart to someone who believes differently, you become an ally, not an adversary, providing a safe place to honestly explore matters of faith.

## **ice breaker**

Describe a time when you were in someone’s home where you felt relaxed, welcomed, and free to be yourself. Who made it comfortable for you and what was your relationship?

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## **related Scripture**

*The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)*

John 4:9 (NIV)

## **challenging wisdom**

*Looking at hospitality as the creation of a free and friendly space where we can reach out to strangers and invite them to become our friends, it is clear that this can take place on many levels and in many relationships. Although the word “stranger” suggests someone who belongs to another world than ours, speaks another language and has different customs, it is important, first of all, to recognize the stranger in our own familiar circle. When we are able to be good hosts for the strangers in our midst we may find also ways to expand our hospitality to broader horizons.*

– Henri Nouwen

## **WE ALL NEED A SAFE PLACE TO LAND**

In 2003, Dr. Will Miller and Dr. Glenn Sparks coined the term “refrigerator rights” to describe open relationships and safe environments. The term applies to people in our lives who can access our refrigerator without asking—a mark of relational trust.

Refrigerator rights isn’t the universal litmus test of welcoming; your heritage, culture, and personality may give rise to different signs of openness. But in our fast-paced high-performance world, few places exist where we can lower our defenses and just be ourselves. When we cultivate this kind of openness within our closest relationships, we will be able to reach out to other people and invite them into an environment where honest spiritual exploration can occur.

**1 DISCUSS ::** Describe someone in your life who has “refrigerator rights” at your house. Would this person also say that they can talk about sensitive subjects with you? Why or why not?

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## **WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**

Welcoming is not the same as entertaining in your home. It’s opening your heart and creating a safe place of love and acceptance wherever you may be. One of the most practical ways to step into another person’s world and to make him or

her feel comfortable enough to step into yours is to simply offer the gift of attentiveness.

In our “two screen” culture, giving your attention to only one thing at a time is rare; we’ve allowed multitasking to become normal. But people won’t feel welcomed if we are checking our mobile device, allowing our minds to wander, or even just thinking about what we’re going to say next. And the opposite is also true: If we stop what we’re doing to listen and give our full attention, they will feel welcomed by us. When you set aside your agenda to focus on someone, you communicate that you value them, and that you’re glad to spend time with them.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Do you think it is possible to open your home but not your heart? Explain.

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What do you think causes us to resist opening our heart—even if we’ve made the effort to open our home? What impact does our closed heart have on the relational and spiritual climate?

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Welcoming provides a safe environment where wrestling with matters of faith for more than just one quick conversation is acceptable, and dealing with the hardships of life without being judged is allowed. It is what everyone desperately needs as they make their way toward faith.

Consider this powerful story of how author Anne Lamott was impacted by the person God used to create a safe place for her:

[The] skinny middle-aged [minister] was still in his office when I arrived. My first impression was that he was smart and profoundly tenderhearted. My next was that he was really listening, that he could hear what I was saying, and so I let it all tumble out—the X-rated motels, my father’s death, a hint that maybe every so often I drank too much. I don’t remember much of his response, except that when I said I didn’t think God could love me, he said, “God has to love you. That’s God’s job.”

Some years later I asked him to tell me about this first meeting. “I felt,” he said, “that you had gotten

yourself so tangled up in big God questions that it was suffocating you. Here you were in a rather desperate situation, suicidal, clearly alcoholic, going down the tubes. I thought the trick was to help you extricate yourself enough so you could breathe again. You said your prayers weren’t working anymore, and I could see that in your desperation you were trying to save yourself: so I said you should stop praying for a while, and let me pray for you. And right away, you seemed to settle down inside.” . . . He was about the first Christian I ever met whom I could stand to be in the same room with.<sup>1</sup>

The minister who met with Anne simply gave her his full attention and modeled what Jesus did. He created a safe place for her to engage with God and truth.

**3 DISCUSS ::** In your spiritual journey, who provided you with a safe place so you could be yourself and ask questions about matters of faith? How did their Christ-like welcome impact you?

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From that experience, what can you apply to the way that you welcome people?

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Even a casual reading of the Gospels shows how often Jesus gave individuals his full attention. For example, in John 4 we read the story of Jesus meeting with the Samaritan woman who came to the well to draw water. Although Jesus was the visitor in the Samaritan woman’s neighborhood, we see him deliberately creating a safe environment for spiritual conversation through his attentiveness. We often think of “welcoming” as inviting people into our home, our church, our turf—asking them to come to us. Jesus turns that upside down by bringing that welcoming space into the woman’s environment—he went to her. And in addition, Jesus stayed two days in the town itself. Though Jesus came from a Jewish culture that shunned Samaritans, his heart was open to the townspeople as he accepted their hospitality.

Similarly, we can bring a welcoming space with us wherever we go. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American ages 25 to 54 spends over

50% of waking hours at work.<sup>2</sup> So the place for most of us to begin creating a more welcoming space may be where we spend most of our time—work.

We can also choose to create patterns in our daily activities outside of work that allow us to get to know people; we can keep going back to the same stores or coffee shops so that we get to know the people who spend a lot of time there.

**4 DISCUSS ::** What pattern could you establish—or do you already have—that would allow you to regularly welcome someone in your life who needs God’s love?

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What do you imagine Jesus would do if he were living your life, following the pattern you just described?

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### ACCEPT PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

When we’re talking to someone engaged in sins we find particularly offensive, it is tempting to focus on their lifestyle choices. Even though we may not appear to do this outwardly, we may inwardly harbor judgments about the person and hold them in contempt. When we do this, we set up barriers that keep us from welcoming. By judging people (even subtly), we play God. By not accepting where a person is, we’re also communicating that we don’t trust God to get them where he wants them to go.

In his conversation with the woman at the well, Jesus gives a great example of talking with someone who is full of moral failures without getting hung up on them. Initially, he finds a point of common interest—water—and then responds casually to her questions in the conversation that unfolds. By the time he brings up her current sinful lifestyle, he does so with grace, also allowing her to change the subject to a topic that she finds more comfortable.

For us, one of the keys to avoid judging people is to take the time to listen. Once we hear more of a person’s story and situation, it becomes easier to be empathetic. The simple phrase “Tell me more about that” creates space for a person to feel welcomed and accepted.

**5 PRACTICE ::** Think of a “Samaritan” in your life. How have you judged or considered yourself superior to this person (morally, aesthetically, vocationally, socio-economically, racially) in your heart or with your words?

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Take a moment to surrender your conclusions and judgments to God, asking him to forgive you for not loving and welcoming this person and to replace your criticism with love and acceptance. Ask God to reveal this person’s good attributes to you and to reveal Jesus to him or her by your actions.

If you are willing, share what you are learning with the group.

### GOD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RESULTS

*So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.*

1 Corinthians 3:7 (NIV)

We all long for places that, while they may not be home, they still feel like home. There, we experience what it means to know and be known, love and be loved. Whether you have welcomed someone to eat a meal with you, into an informal conversation at the water cooler at work, or by gladly entering their home, the spiritual result of your interaction must be left in God’s hands. Sometimes just being together and building a friendship has a greater net effect than anything you say about the Bible or your relationship with Christ. Your job is to create a safe space where someone can honestly explore matters of faith with you as a true friend. Where it goes from there is ultimately between them and God.

**6 DISCUSS ::** Is there someone whom you have welcomed into your life who still seems to be keeping the door closed to spiritual conversations? What insights have you gained during this discussion that will enable you to deepen your welcome and leave the results up to God?

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

This week, reflect on your relationship with a few people who are not yet followers of Christ. For each one, give yourself a “refrigerator rights” rating:

**Low** (1-2): Up to this point, I have kept my home and my heart closed to this person.

**Middle** (3): I have opened my home to this person but I am guarding my heart—or, I have somewhat opened my heart but not let them come into my home.

**High** (4-5): My home and my heart are open to this person; our relationship is a “safe place” where both of us are ourselves.

Follow up your ratings by challenging yourself to take one simple step toward each person to deepen your relationship. Then, confess to God where you have closed yourself off, and ask him how you can create a more welcoming “safe place to land” with each one.

## QPlace STORY

As Jim and Deanna prepared to buy their first house, they prayed that God would place them in a neighborhood where they could be the presence of Jesus. They found a house and moved in. The initial awkwardness of being “the new people on the block” soon gave way to friendly connections, but they were anxious to build deeper community. So they came up with the idea of hosting an open house. Partnering with a Christian couple they knew in the area, they invited everyone in the neighborhood to come over for a few hours late on a Sunday afternoon. There were babysitters for the children and everyone brought food to share. They had no agenda except to welcome and love their neighbors. And they did!

Soon they made the open house a once-a-month event. As a result, they noticed more ways to be involved with their neighbors’

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

When you welcome people who believe differently rather than shunning them, your winsome friendship as a follower of Jesus creates a place where God can work to bring about eternal life change.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *The Art of Neighboring* by Jay Pathak and David Runyon (Baker Books)
- *Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith* by Bill Hybels (Zondervan)
- *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of Spiritual Life* by Henri Nouwen (Doubleday)
- *Refrigerator Rights: Creating Connections and Restoring Relationships* by Will Miller and Glenn Sparks (Willow Creek Association)
- *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* by Anne Lamott (Pantheon)
- [www.artofneighboring.com](http://www.artofneighboring.com)

lives. Deanna joined a neighborhood book group. Jim surprised his next-door neighbor by mowing his lawn—and then mowed another neighbor’s lawn after the guys in the neighborhood ribbed him. Within a year, the couple who lived next door asked them to be the godparents of their fourth child. Later a neighbor came over and confided in Jim and Deanna that her marriage was deteriorating. Though she had never before shown openness to talking about God, she asked them to pray for her and her children.

Jim cared deeply about the guys in the neighborhood. Motivated by that love, and sensing that they trusted him and that the timing was right, he invited some of them to come over and discuss questions about God and life. They came, and have continued to come—fully engaging themselves in meaningful discussions about God.



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**Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.**

# HOW CAN WE WELCOME INTO COMMUNITY?

## the **big** idea

When you create an environment for connection, conversation, and acceptance, your community becomes a safe place where newcomers are welcomed in.

## ice breaker

Share an experience when you internally struggled with genuinely welcoming someone from your heart. What effect did that have on the openness and welcome of others around you?

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## related **Scripture**

*While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Matthew 9:10-12 (NIV)*

## challenging **wisdom**

*In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found... Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.*

– Henri Nouwen

## WHERE STRANGERS BECOME FRIENDS

"The Cape of Good Hope." That is the name that one family has labeled their small Cape Cod home in suburban Chicago. In a world where people are always "on" and often "on their own," this family believes strongly in the value of creating a safe, welcoming environment. They want their home to be a place where spiritual seekers can explore matters of faith openly in the company of true friends. They also created a motto for their home: "Where strangers become friends and friends become family." As you might expect, their welcome extends far beyond the limits of their house, cultivating community wherever they go—because welcoming is not just about inviting, it's about bringing a warm, inviting presence to others wherever you are.

Creating that kind of environment is a challenge, especially when believers and unbelievers are in the same room. How easy it is for defenses to rise when worldviews

clash! But Jesus modeled the value of welcoming people together in community, to experience his care and interact with his words together. As he rubbed shoulders with people from all walks of life and varied spiritual backgrounds, he was intent on keeping the environment around him open to people with baggage of all kinds.

**1 DISCUSS ::** What do you think helps to create an environment where people who are exploring Christ and those who are close to Christ can rub shoulders and people don't feel excluded?

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Jesus went into the marketplace to choose someone from a despised profession—a tax collector for the Romans—to become one of his inner circle of followers. Luke records that

after Matthew left his office, he *gave a big reception for [Jesus] in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them* (5:29 NASB). As a follower of Jesus, Matthew did not snub his friends who were far from God; instead he drew them in to meet the man who totally changed his life. Here is Matthew's own account of what happened next:

*While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."* Matthew 9:10-12 (NIV)

Jesus stood up for those who were eating with him at the table. You can imagine, though, how uncomfortable the situation must have been for the disciples when the Pharisees called them to account for Jesus. They must have felt both defensive and confused. But Jesus spoke up, countering the thinking of the religious leaders who wanted to exclude "the sinners." With a simple statement reflecting his love for people, Jesus clarified the issue for his disciples, confronted the religious leaders' exclusivity, and kept the welcome open for all who wanted to be there. Though the story doesn't mention details of hospitality in Matthew's home, something about the setting catalyzed connection; people from a variety of backgrounds were worthy of friendship there. In that setting, they could consider the possibility of the new way of life Jesus was making available.

Some key, common "ingredients" that create a welcoming environment might include honesty, authenticity, common interests, a flexible plan, food that is generously shared, good conversation, genuine listening, empathy, fun, and humor. However, even with the best of these ingredients, the foundation of welcoming into community is taking the risk to open up our hearts.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Pair up with another person in the group. Talk about ingredients of welcoming that come naturally to you and that would enable you to create a safe, inviting environment for seekers and Christians to be together. For example, how well do you leverage fun, humor, common interests, authenticity, etc.?

## CREATE THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

A lifestyle of welcoming others into community can be cultivated through careful observation and planning over time as well as intentional decisions in the moment. Welcoming requires attentiveness to what feels welcoming for unique individuals in specific situations. There are principles, not formulas; when you experience it, you know it. In *The Pursuit of God in the Company of Friends*, Richard Lamb highlights five spaces you can focus on to create a truly welcoming environment: Physical Space, Temporal Space, Social Space, Emotional Space, and Spiritual Space.<sup>1</sup>

As you seek to welcome people into your specific community, you can think through each kind of space, considering what will help to foster relationships, and how to approach challenges.

### 1. Physical Space

Where we meet and the condition of the space matters. Whether you are meeting in your living room, kitchen, dorm, coffee shop, or a park, think through what will help the people you're inviting to feel welcome. Your body language also impacts the welcome of your physical space.

**3 DISCUSS ::** What elements of a physical space have you found to create an environment where people feel welcome and at ease with each other? (For example, how important is white-glove neatness, an orderly space, or a more casual setting? When is a television distracting or when can it help? How can shared food help build community?)

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### 2. Temporal Space

Both structured and unstructured blocks of time together matter. You could create this sort of space by cooking and/or eating a meal together, going to see a movie and talking about it afterward, serving at a food pantry together, even taking a road trip or vacation together. Shared experiences build relational closeness. Part of creating temporal space is focusing only on those you are with; avoid multitasking.

### 3. Social Space

Helping people be at ease matters. To limit relational awkwardness and build rapport, look for common ground,

such as stage of life, hobbies, or enthusiasm for a sports team or a musical group. Ask open-ended questions to encourage people to share their stories. In a casual group setting, look for ways to connect people with each other.

If you're starting a new group, ice breakers (conversation-starting questions) can really help people who are strangers find common ground and begin to get to know one another. Set the stage well at the beginning and when newcomers arrive by explaining the purpose and nature of the group, along with any ground rules. Giving group members the opportunity to say what they have experienced in the group also builds community.

Be watchful for negative actions such as gossip, criticism, or exclusiveness, which can destroy a group. When you notice any of these issues, try to address them before they become a pattern.

**4 DISCUSS ::** How can you make introductions that help people quickly feel connected and valued?

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What have you found to be helpful in guarding the safety of a group against destructive comments or actions?

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#### 4. Emotional Space

Going beyond superficiality matters. It takes prayerful insight to foster honesty and vulnerability at an appropriate level and pace, especially in the context of a group. As you get to know people over time, be willing to ask questions that encourage deeper discussion. Keep it safe for people to share transparently by affirming and encouraging them rather than by giving advice or communicating a judging attitude.

**5 DISCUSS ::** What experience have you had of sharing at a vulnerable level in a group? How did the reaction of the group affect you?

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#### 5. Spiritual Space

Reflection, prayer, and faith-based dialogue matters. When inviting people to spend time with you, pray before, after, and during your time with them (not necessarily out loud with people who aren't used to that). While you're together, you can silently ask God for wisdom to deepen the conversation, as well as to discern what needs to be said and what needs to be left unsaid for now. Be willing to discuss difficult questions and explore answers together. And be willing to admit that you don't have all the answers. Allow life and faith to be messy and mysterious at times. Be intentional about taking relationships deeper; then conversations about God will become a lot more natural.

**6 DISCUSS ::** When have you been in a group when a meaningful conversation about God bubbled up? What was it that seemed to make the environment fertile for that to happen?

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Of these five "spaces," only one refers to a place where we might welcome others. The other "spaces" are those we carry with us. Jesus welcomed not only by going to Matthew's workplace (physical space) and inviting him to come alongside and live life with him (temporal space), but also by accepting his hospitality and his friends (social space). He preserved the welcoming environment in the face of opposition (emotional space) and also communicated truth that was appropriate for the moment (spiritual space).

**7 PRACTICE ::** One person in the group: Share about a specific interest or hobby—the more obscure the better.  
The rest of the group: Find ways to connect with this person and make him or her feel "welcome" through whatever feels natural in this setting.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

In the next day, make a list of various times over the coming week when you are likely to find yourself in a group setting. Choose one or two of those situations. Thinking through the five “spaces,” jot down ways that you may be able to cultivate a welcoming community among people who are there. Then try it. Journal what worked well, where you could improve, and what you learned.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

When you have a welcoming heart for others, you can cultivate a more welcoming community by focusing on creating physical, temporal, social, emotional, and spiritual spaces where people are drawn in and feel that it’s safe to be transparent and to explore the biggest questions of life.

## QPlace STORY

A few years ago, Judson’s church partnered with a ministry that helped foreign refugees to settle in America. These families, fleeing persecution, came with little more than the clothes on their backs, often having spent time in refugee camps, their lives threatened or their homes destroyed. Through this partnership, Judson’s family had the opportunity to invite a Muslim refugee family to Thanksgiving dinner at their home.

On so many levels, these families had nothing in common. They were from a different religion, a different continent, a different culture, a different ethnicity, and a different socio-economic bracket. Had the two families focused on differences, they would certainly have never made a connection. The refugee family spoke very little English, but their older son had learned enough to be able to translate a bit.

One easy point of connection was to explain the historic

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *The Pursuit of God in the Company of Friends* by Richard Lamb (InterVarsity Press)
- *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* by Henri Nouwen (Doubleday)
- *Refrigerator Rights: Creating Connections and Restoring Relationships* by Will Miller and Glenn Sparks (Willow Creek Association)

background of Thanksgiving Day—a celebration based on the experience of people who had suffered persecution in their home country and who fled to find freedom and a new life. As Judson explained the events that led up to that first Thanksgiving, his guests nodded knowingly. That story was their own reality. They were moved by what they heard, and in a strange way, they felt more like they belonged in their new country after learning how similar their lives were to those early settlers.

As the two families said goodbye, the family’s father touched his chest, and then pointed at Judson, saying words that he couldn’t understand. The man’s son, standing beside him, smiled as he translated: “He says, ‘Your heart is good.’” Judson looked back at him and said, “Thank you. And so is yours.”



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4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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# The Art of Facilitating

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**7.1 WHY FACILITATE?**

**7.2 HOW CAN WE LEAD WITH THREE?**

**7.3 HOW CAN WE START A Q PLACE?**

**7.4 HOW CAN WE SUSTAIN A HEALTHY GROUP?**





# WHY FACILITATE?

## the **big** idea

People learn best when they discover truths for themselves through a well-facilitated process.

### **ice breaker**

In small group experiences you have had, did group leaders primarily teach or did they facilitate a discussion? Which do you prefer? Why?

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### **related Scripture**

*And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” They said to Him, “Rabbi (which translated means “Teacher”), where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come, and you will see.”*

John 1:38-39 (NASB)

### **challenging wisdom**

*One who learns through the process of honest questioning, objective thinking, and respectful challenging is more apt to know in the end what is really true. And he will also know why he believes it.*

– Randall Arthur

## FACILITATING SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS CAN ACCELERATE SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

Scottish theologian William Barclay pointed out that “It is only when truth is self-discovered that it is appropriated. When a man is simply told the truth, it remains external to him and he can quite easily forget it. When he is led to discover the truth for himself, it becomes an integral part of him, and he never forgets it.”<sup>1</sup>

There are two general approaches to learning: the *telling* approach and the *asking* approach. In the telling approach, sometimes referred to as didactic or *deductive* learning, one individual acts as the expert, telling listeners what he or she has learned about a selected topic. In this approach, the listeners are passive receivers of information and the teacher is the active giver of information. In the asking or *inductive* approach, facilitators create an environment in which the participants can all be active discoverers. The facilitator is a guide—not teaching or dispensing information, but helping people to make discoveries themselves.

In the early 1960s, Marilyn Kunz saw the need for adults to have a place to discover and discuss the Bible’s content, and to come to well-supported conclusions about what it says. In helping Christians understand the importance of

facilitating a self-discovery process for spiritual seekers, she would say, “This is the only way it really gets into another person’s mind, heart, understanding. We may think we’ve gotten it across to them, but we really haven’t.”

**1 DISCUSS ::** How do you learn best? Through active discussion and participation or through lecture? Why?

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Throughout church history, efforts within the institutional church to disciple and evangelize others have focused primarily on preaching and teaching. This approach worked relatively well because the time to process ideas was woven into the fabric of life through days filled with physical activity and natural conversational interactions with family and community. But our fast-paced culture of distractions and media overload provides very little time to think and process individually what you believe about God. In addition, the breakdown of the traditional family and close-knit communities means that Christian principles are not naturally modeled in organic relationships. The result

is a growing need for opportunities to discuss and process biblical teachings. For Christians, intentional facilitation is now more essential than ever in discipleship and evangelism as a complement to preaching and teaching, helping people focus on truth long enough to process and understand what is being presented.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Share how you made a significant decision in your life (marriage, college, home purchase, salvation, baptism). Did you arrive at your decision through conversations, expert advice, or a blend of both?

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The definition of *facilitate* means “to make easier or less difficult” or “to help forward.” A facilitator is more a guide than an expert or source of information. The role is one of helping someone learn. The focus is on the learner, not the one teaching. Facilitation is learner-centered rather than teacher-focused. A facilitator guides learners who are active in the process rather than supplying information to passive recipients.

Facilitation is more difficult than teaching because you do not control the process. And let’s face it; we all prefer to be in control. Facilitation is messy, takes more time, and requires patience. But it’s worth it if people can learn more and grow this way. It has been estimated that people remember 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 70% of what they say, and 90% of what they do themselves. Real-life experience confirms this. For example, the best way to learn to cook well is not merely to observe an expert chef in a culinary show, but to prepare meals following his or her instructions.

**3 DISCUSS ::** As the leader of a group, do you think it would be more difficult to facilitate or to teach? Why?

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**4 PRACTICE ::** For the remainder of this session, practice by taking turns asking the discussion questions and facilitating the discussion for that question.

## JESUS MODELED FACILITATION

If people learn more effectively when they are active in the learning process, then there is a desperate need in today’s culture to wisely facilitate discussions about spiritual matters. Yet Jesus’ actions in first-century Israel reveal the timeless value of facilitation. Even Jesus’ public ministry required people to wrestle with the meaning of what he said—it’s easy to imagine people discussing one of Jesus’ parables as they walked home. But Jesus’ primary focus was to facilitate learning and growth in a small group of twelve. Again and again, Jesus took his small band of followers aside and helped them think through what he had just said or done. He asked them many more questions than he gave answers.

Consider the account of Jesus providing food for a multitude in John 6. He could have just noticed the need for food and then filled it. Instead, he asks Philip, “*Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?*” (John 6:5, NIV). In response to this question, Philip identifies the financial extent of need (more than 200 denarii, or two years’ wages), and Andrew points out the meager resource available (five barley loaves and two fish). Then, all of the Twelve are involved in seating the crowd of people, counting them, passing out the miraculously provided meal, and collecting the leftovers.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Do you think Jesus knew the answer to the question he asked about where to buy the bread for the masses of people? Why would he ask this question?

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Later in John 6, this group of twelve wrestles with another question, this time related to Jesus’ identity. People had been glad to eat the physical bread that he had provided, but they couldn’t accept Jesus’ radical statements that followed, starting with “*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*” When many people had left, Jesus places a question before the Twelve that gives them the opportunity to identify what they believe. He says, “*You do not want to leave too, do you?*” Peter is the one who voices conclusions based on what he has seen for himself: “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God*” (John 6:68-69, NIV).

**6 DISCUSS ::** How does Jesus approach the challenging topic of whether the disciples were still committed to follow him?

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Was Jesus a learner-centered teacher? Why or why not?

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### CORE VALUES FOR THE ART OF FACILITATING

With Jesus as our model, we can learn to become more intentional as we make new disciples through small groups in which we are guides (not teachers) to those seeking God. In the past few decades, small groups in churches have become a common experience for many Christians. However, often they have been started and led in a way that does not result in vibrant discussions and growth for all of the participants. Some small group leaders try to follow the approach of a preacher or a teacher, bearing the weight of studying and then dispensing information and truth that they have discovered. Others simply are present in the group, but have no idea how to spark a discussion and keep it going. In both cases, the group does not flourish.

But spiritual transformation in a small group requires more than just getting a group of believers or skeptics together to talk about God and the Bible, and it looks far different from a lecture scaled down to a small group monologue. There are key foundational elements that will help a small group thrive, including strong inductive resources and clear guidelines that form a framework for the discussion. But it all starts with core values—beliefs that can be expressed simply to people from a wide variety of spiritual starting points—that permeate the culture of the group.

**7 DISCUSS ::** Why do you think core values might be important in a small group?

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Core values are an important building block for launching and leading a small group. Why? Management consultant

Margaret Wheatley asserts that our values, expressed by our actions, tell others a lot about who we are and what we believe, even more so than our words.

Perhaps we need to imagine ourselves as beacon towers of information, standing tall in the integrity of what we say, pulsing out congruent messages everywhere. We need all of us out there, stating, clarifying, reflecting, modeling, filling all of space with the messages we care about.<sup>2</sup>

The following four core values provide a common ground and create an inviting environment for the group. As participants continue to sense these values in the group, they are likely to engage more and more fully, to take risks, and to experience God's work in their lives.

- *Self-Discovery:* People grow and learn best when they discover truth for themselves through discussion and study.
- *Safe Place:* An ideal environment for spiritual growth is in a small group where personal dignity is valued and leadership is shared.
- *Spirit:* God's Spirit will guide those who are spiritually open.
- *Scripture:* The Bible and the life of Jesus are worth serious examination.

**8 DISCUSS ::** How might each of these core values help facilitate meaningful conversations?

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Among your spiritually curious acquaintances and friends who are skeptics or seekers, who might be open to a group that reflects these qualities?

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**9 DISCUSS ::** Why might facilitating a small group enable people to learn more than when it is led by someone who teaches the group?

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

The next time you are in a small group of people, think of ways to draw others out by asking good questions that stimulate conversation. It doesn't have to be about spiritual matters. When you start focusing on ways to get people talking about a topic, you'll be surprised how they will respond to the invitation to engage with others if they believe you are interested in hearing what they have to say.

Journal your experience. Share with your group the next time you get together.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

People learn best when they discover truths for themselves. A facilitated small group process guided by the Holy Spirit is the ideal environment for spiritual transformation. By facilitating discovery of biblical truths within a relational,

supportive small group, you provide an opportunity for people to engage fully in the process of learning.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *How to Start a Q Place* by Mary Schaller (Q Place)
- *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice* by Maryellen Weimer (Jossey-Bass)
- *Life Groups @ CHC* by Eric Rust (Plaudit Press)
- *Transforming Discipleship* by Greg Ogden (InterVarsity Press)

## QPlace STORY

Bill loved leading his small group. It gave him opportunities to teach others what he was learning in his Sunday school Bible class. He would bring commentaries on the book of the Bible the group was studying so he could give them even more information about the passage. Bill was learning so much by preparing for his mini-lectures he regularly presented to the group. There wasn't much dynamic discussion or diversity of opinion, as it wasn't necessary with Bill in the room. He had almost any answer that people needed. The other members of the group didn't always agree with Bill or get to talk much, but he made it so clear that he was the expert they were afraid to speak up with a differing opinion.

Then one day Bill was sick with the flu, and Sally, Bill's wife, volunteered to lead the group that night in his place. Sally didn't consider herself a Bible expert, but she knew how to draw people out. She brought a discussion guide that asked good questions about the Bible passage. She made sure everyone got a chance to talk and share their views, even if they didn't agree with hers or others' in the group. By the end of the evening, there was more laughter and lively discussion than most evenings. Everyone asked if Sally would mind leading more often. They couldn't quite put their finger on how it was different from Bill's leadership, but they knew they liked it and wanted more.



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# HOW CAN WE LEAD WITH THREE?

## the **big** idea

A triad approach to small group leadership sets everyone up for success.

### ice breaker

Describe a task that you performed or a problem you solved with two other people. What did you notice about the relationship among the three of you? How is working with three different from doing something with only two?

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### related **Scripture**

*A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.*

Ecclesiastes 4:12 (NLT)

### challenging **wisdom**

*Without question, the setting where I have experienced the most accelerated transformation in the lives of believers has been in small reproducible discipleship groups I have labeled microgroups. I call them “hothouses of Holy Spirit.” Hothouses are heated enclosures that create the right environmental conditions for living things to grow at a rate greater than under natural circumstances.*

– Greg Ogden

## TRIADS OFFER TRIPLE-STRENGTH LEADERSHIP

In the 1940s, famed architect Buckminster Fuller declared the triangle to be the perfect form for designing strong, light, economical buildings. Fuller observed that the simplicity of the three-sided shape achieves maximum efficiency with minimum structural effort. In fact, a triangle is more than twice as strong as a rectangle—its unique configuration allows it to bear stresses that other shapes simply can't. Based on this principle, Fuller designed incredible structures that simply wouldn't have been possible without the fundamental strength of triangles.

Just like great buildings, great small groups require a well-designed approach to leadership that not only withstands the challenges of leading a group but also thrives in the midst of those challenges.

**1 DISCUSS ::** Based on your experience in small groups, what do you think is the best design for small group leadership, and why?

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The demands of group life can be overwhelming. Solo facilitation casts the facilitator as a small group superhero who has x-ray vision into group dynamics, heroic power to invite people to the group, and the ability to leap over discussion-ending comments in a single bound. But who facilitates the group when the leader is out of town or sick? What happens when the leader starts to burn out or has to work late? How can the leader invite people into the group beyond his or her social circle?

A partnership of two facilitators alleviates some of the challenges of solo facilitation but tends to promote a hierarchical leader/apprentice model. The less experienced facilitator often defers to the more experienced leader, reducing his or her contribution to the group. And in small group discussions, the group tends to value the primary leader's input over the apprentice's input.

By contrast, with a triad of leadership, three people partner together to maximize each other's strengths, support each other through the ups and downs of group life, and model the sort of community they want to see in the group they lead.

**2 DISCUSS ::** If you have been in a small group with three facilitators, how did that compare to a small group experience with just one or two leaders? (If not, how do you think a small group experience you have had would have been different with a triad of leadership?)

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There's no such thing as a perfect group facilitator—every facilitator has strengths and weaknesses. A facilitator may be great at inviting people to the group, but struggle to lead discussions. A facilitator may have great empathy, but shy away from addressing deep issues for fear of group conflict. A facilitator may be great at asking questions, but weak at waiting to hear answers. And, whatever their gift mix, every facilitator has good days and bad days, moments when they lead well and moments when they don't.

No matter the strengths and weaknesses of individual facilitators, triad leadership fosters greater success and greater synergy through the power of partnership. The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes describes this power and highlights the unique advantages of three working together:

*Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.... A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.*  
(Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, NLT)

**3 DISCUSS ::** How might you apply Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, with its imagery of a triple-braided cord, to leadership in a small group?

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Every facilitator wants to succeed in leading a group. But no one facilitator has all the answers or the perspective to evaluate how the group is doing. And at one point or another, every leader finds that they get stalled—stuck in a relational challenge, overwhelmed by other pressures in life, frustrated with the momentum of a discussion.

A triad of facilitators can support each other both inside and outside of the small group setting. For example, when the group discussion bogs down, one of them may offer a new question or point the group back to its guidelines. Outside of the group, facilitators can debrief, offering each other specific affirmation and constructive suggestions for future group sessions.

The triad leadership approach allows each facilitator to use his or her strengths and look to others to compensate for weaknesses. As a result, he or she will feel more at home in the facilitating role and better valued for what he or she brings to the group.

More than anything, triad leadership says “we're in this together.” In a triad, facilitators share “warmth”—encouragement, prayer, ideas, support, wisdom. Triad leadership lives out the idea that we can do more together than we could ever do alone.

**4 DISCUSS ::** What resonates with you regarding the success and synergy of starting a small group with two other people?

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What seems foreign to you, based on your previous small group experiences?

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### TRIADS MODEL DISCIPLESHIP IN COMMUNITY

Effective group facilitators strive to provide an environment that is conducive to exploration and discovery, where people who believe differently can explore, discover, and share

with transparency while the Spirit of God works through Scripture. As they create this environment for others, they need it also for themselves.

As the adage goes, “You can’t give away what you don’t have.” If a facilitator isn’t being disciplined in a loving community, that facilitator is ill-equipped to disciple others in a loving community. A triad lives out the idea of peer-discipleship, of “iron sharpening iron” (Proverbs 27:17).

Jesus modeled this community-within-a-community approach; while investing in all twelve apostles, he gave extra attention to the triad of Peter, James, and John. Jesus exclusively invited them into specific highs and lows of his ministry—the resurrection of a little girl (Mark 5:37-42), the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13), and his night of prayer at Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-34).

Surely Peter, James, and John talked together about these experiences. That processing-in-community perfectly captures the essence of a triad—meeting together to work through our responses to Jesus and partnering together in the Kingdom work Jesus gives us to do. Triad meetings outside of small group meetings offer a rich discipleship environment for facilitators.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Why do you think Jesus had an inner circle of Peter, James, and John among his twelve apostles?

## TO START A SMALL GROUP, START A TRIAD. TO LEAD A SMALL GROUP, LEAD AS A TRIAD.

The idea of starting a small group for seekers might seem daunting, overwhelming you with questions such as *Where will I find enough people to be in the group? What should we discuss? How will I deal with challenging group members?*

It’s far easier to start a triad, and then you have the foundation for a group. To start a triad, go through the same four stages: preparation, invitation, trial meeting, and growth.

### 1. Preparation

Through prayer and reflection, ask God to point you toward acquaintances, friends, or even strangers who might consider being a part of a triad. While triad members can be close friends, they certainly don’t have to be. In fact, your triad will be energized by including people you don’t know well.

### 2. Invitation

Initiate individual conversations with potential triad members over coffee or lunch. Briefly explain why you thought of them as potential triad members, and share some of your hopes for a small group that you three could start.

### 3. Trial Meeting

Invite them to join you for a trial triad meeting. At the meeting, spend some time getting to know each other, discuss the triad model of leadership, and talk about a future small group. If you sense chemistry in the group and both facilitators sign on, move ahead to the next step. If not, return to stage 1.

### 4. Growth

Establish a pattern for regularly meeting together. Continue to get to know each other as you move toward launching your small group. Share the names of people you’d each like to see join the group, and pray for those people together. Set the place and time for the trial meeting of your small group, and hold each other accountable to extend invitations to that meeting.

Once you launch a small group, continue to meet together as a triad to evaluate how the group is doing, to pray for each other and the group, and to consider whom else to invite. Share leadership by rotating responsibility for the small group from week to week.

The high calling of small group leadership is too important to do alone. Triad leadership offers a strong discipleship-based model for starting and leading a small group. Beyond all these benefits, it’s simply more fun to lead, celebrate, and grow in community!

**6 DISCUSS ::** What benefits do you see in starting with a triad of facilitators before launching a small group? Challenges?

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Do you think the foundation of a triad of facilitators might increase the likelihood of new groups starting? Why or why not?

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

This week take some time to list the attributes of a person you'd consider inviting to join you in a triad for the purpose of launching a small group. Write down the reasons that these attributes are important to you. Spend some time in prayer and write down any individuals who come to mind. Pray for those people and ask God for guidance to start a triad for discipleship and facilitation of a small group.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

A team of three offers unique strength that's perfectly suited to the demands of starting and facilitating a small group. A triad provides an ideal climate for spiritual growth as you are

mutually accountable, transparent, and supportive, applying Scripture and depending on God together in the process of leading a small group.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Christianity Beyond Belief* by Todd Hunter (InterVarsity Press)
- *How to Start a Q Place* by Mary Schaller (Q Place)
- *Life Groups at Cedar Hills* by Eric Rust (Plaudit Press)
- *Transforming Discipleship* by Greg Ogden (InterVarsity Press)

## QPlace STORY

Michelle was inspired to start a small group for people in her community, so she prayed for God to show her two people who would join her. Later that month, she met with two friends from her church to see if they wanted to start a triad and then launch a spiritual conversation group with her. Nicholas and Karen were intrigued.

The first time the three got together, they spent time getting acquainted at a deeper level, sharing their fears and apprehensions as well as their excitement about reaching out to people outside of the church. The next time, each one brought a list of acquaintances who might be interested in coming to a group to discuss questions about God. After describing each person on their lists, they committed to pray for each one. They also shared their reservations: Karen wasn't sure she had time to add one more activity to her schedule; Nicholas, a pastor, recognized his tendency to teach rather than facilitate and

was afraid that it might be awkward for him to be in a group like this; Michelle was traveling a lot with her job and wasn't sure if she had the time or consistency to make this group happen. They all agreed to pray for each other. They also decided to connect intentionally with the people on their lists and meet every couple of weeks to share what was happening.

Four months later, this triad had seen God do amazing things in their relationships with the people on their lists. He had also united their triad, and they were now ready to do this! They extended personal invitations, had their first Q Place meeting, and were thrilled to see their group not only become a reality, but lead to transformation in the lives of everyone in their group—including their own.



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# HOW CAN WE START A Q PLACE?

## the **big** idea

When small groups form through prayer, relationships, and compelling invitations, they are likely to change the spiritual lives of the participants.

## ice breaker

Describe the best small group experience you've had. How did you get involved in the group? Why was the group significant to you?

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## related **Scripture**

*Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?" "Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.*

John 1:38-42a (NIV)

## challenging **wisdom**

*Small groups were an integral part of the early church structure. They were small enough to allow individual members to minister to one another, use their spiritual gifts, and be disciplined in the teachings of Christ. In addition, they were vibrant and life-giving communities where evangelism could take place as unchurched people watched a loving and compassionate community in action.*

– Bill Donahue

## PREPARE TO START

In the fifth century, a young man named Patrick lived happily with his parents in a small village on the west coast of England. At age fifteen, Patrick was kidnapped by pirates who took him to Ireland and sold him into slavery. During his six years in captivity, Patrick learned the language, the customs, and the culture of the local tribes. On the green hills of Ireland, he also came to know God. Almost as soon as he escaped and returned home, he discovered that God wanted him to return someday to "walk among the Irish" and teach them about Jesus.

A few decades later, this man—who ultimately became known as St. Patrick—returned to Ireland to introduce people to a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. He believed that these people—who were considered "pagans and barbarians" by the Roman civilized world—were more likely to take steps toward God through invitations to fellowship rather than to a formal service in a cathedral.<sup>1</sup> Patrick's approach to discipleship ultimately led to an invitation of commitment and belief in Jesus, but it started with an experience of belonging to a holistic Christian community. Hundreds of thousands of people became

committed followers of Jesus through Patrick's leadership.

We are living in times when the Western world has increasingly rejected institutional Christianity. An invitation to explore God and the Bible with a few others is a great first step for people who are unlikely to step through the doors of an institutional church. It's also a rich, holistic approach for believers of all levels of maturity.

**1 DISCUSS ::** What impacts you most about St. Patrick's story? How would you describe "holistic Christian community"?

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Jesus is our model for creating God-honoring, life-changing fellowship. When he began his earthly ministry, he could have spent all of his time preaching to thousands. This might seem like the most efficient method of gathering followers. Instead, Jesus invited twelve ordinary Jewish men into a community to learn and grow together as they followed him. Rather than mass-producing disciples, Jesus chose to invest deeply in a few people, thereby developing committed followers.

There are four simple stages that Q Place has identified as essential in starting a small group, stages that mirror what Jesus did in building his group of twelve committed followers:

### 1. Preparation

Jesus spent focused time in prayer and discernment about the people he would disciple. Notice how he prayed all night in Luke 6:12-13. For us today, prayer is also crucial. In addition, preparation involves finding at least one other person to initiate a small group community with you and building relationships with people who may accept your invitations.

### 2. Invitation

Jesus extended compelling invitations to those he chose to follow him. See John 1:35-50, Luke 5:27-32, and Luke 6:13-16. For our invitations to be compelling, we need to pray for those we will invite, and follow the Holy Spirit's guidance in the way that we invite them.

### 3. Trial Meeting

Jesus invited potential followers to come and see where he was staying and spend the day with him, almost as a sample of what it would be like to follow him (John 1:39). When we

extend invitations to "come once and check it out," people are more likely to come; it's appealing that they aren't yet making a commitment.

### 4. Growth

Jesus knew that if those he invited to follow him stayed for more than a day, they would grow in their understanding of God and the Scriptures. When we are obedient to what God is calling us to do, helping people experience God's Word for themselves, we can be assured that everyone will grow. (Including us!)

**2 DISCUSS ::** For you personally, what do you think is the most challenging stage in starting a small group community? Why?

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## CAST COMPELLING INVITATIONS TO COME ONCE

There is something powerful about a personal invitation. Think about most of the things you have said yes to in your life. When you get invited to a party by someone you like, or you are admitted to a certain school, or asked to join a group of friends with common interests, you feel special. You know that not everyone received an invitation. There was some selection process, and you made the cut!

We all have a basic need to belong. So when you extend an invitation for someone to join a spiritual conversation group, you are communicating a message that you like them and want to include them in something new that might be beneficial to them. If God has been preparing the person's mind and heart, the invitation will likely result in a positive response. It helps a lot if you've established a friendship with that person and relational trust has been built.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Why is it easier to receive invitations than to extend them to others? For you, what is the most challenging aspect of inviting people to a small group?

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Jesus extended specific invitations to follow him. In John 1:38-45, Jesus responds directly to the point of interest of two men who ask him where he is staying. He invites them to *come and see*. Notice what happens in the next few verses:

A few of them go and invite someone else to come; and Jesus interacts personally and uniquely with each one. And so, John, Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, and Nathanael all get a taste of what it would be like to spend time with Jesus before they officially become his followers.

But there were others, like the rich young ruler who, after learning that following Jesus meant leaving his riches behind, turned down Jesus' invitation (Matthew 19:21-22). Not every invitation will result in immediate acceptance.

**4 DISCUSS ::** Do you think Jesus was hurt or angry by the rich young ruler's rejection of his invitation? Why or why not?

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Before constructing a compelling invitation to explore spiritual matters in a small group, develop a list of whom to invite, and then pray regularly for them with one or two others who will facilitate the group with you. (See *The Art of Facilitating* 7.2 for the value of a triad of initiators in a Q Place.)

Garry Poole, in his book *Seeker Small Groups*, provides ten invitation guidelines. They include: ask face to face; earn the right to invite through building relationships; be warm and friendly; dispel fears associated with a spiritual conversations group; invite them to come once and check it out; and follow up on all invitations.

**5 PRACTICE ::** Develop an invitation you could use to invite a particular person you know to join a spiritual conversation group. Then in pairs, describe the person you had in mind and practice your invitations with each other. Give each other feedback. How effective do you think each invitation would be with the person you identified? How did it feel to be the inviter? The invitee? How could you improve next time?

## CREATE A SAFE PLACE TO START AND GROW

Costco probably does the best job of any store out there in offering free samples of the foods for sale in their store. You can go there before lunch or dinner and make a meal from the various food stands, with everything from Chinese chicken salad to chocolate truffles! The premise is that if you like the sample, then you're likely to buy the product.

The first small group meeting is like a Costco food sample: It is essential to get it right upon the first "taste." It should be fun and nonthreatening. You are trying to create common bonds and get a glimpse of how people can talk about God without angry arguments or feeling judged for their beliefs. Check out the book *How to Start a Q Place* for more tips and format ideas for the trial meeting.

If people agree to meet again after that first gathering, you are off on an adventure of learning and spiritual growth for everyone, including you! Keep in mind that the group is designed for the participants and their questions; they should help decide what to discuss in subsequent meetings. The primary focus of your group is to discuss God as he's revealed in the Bible. That might be accomplished by going through discussion-starter videos called *The 7 Big Questions* produced by Explore God, or by reading and discussing the Bible using simple inductive questions or an inductive Bible study guide. See *The Art of Facilitating* 7.4 for more on curriculum and group guidelines.

**6 DISCUSS ::** Why do you think the first meeting is so important? What "group killers" would almost guarantee that people wouldn't come back?

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Jesus is our model for starting small groups. He prepared well by praying for whom to invite, he cast compelling invitations, he encouraged those he invited to check it out, and those who accepted his invitation grew in their understanding of God. Jesus knew the Kingdom of God was all about relationships with each other and with him. He's our model for starting small groups today.

**7 PRACTICE ::** In groups of three, answer these questions: Where do you naturally connect with people who believe differently? Who is God placing on your mind and heart to invite to a spiritual conversation group?

Share names that come to mind and pray together. Ask God to make it clear whether he wants you to start a group and to show you who would be likely co-initiators. If it doesn't appear that you have the ability to add any more activities, ask God to show you what you could eliminate to make room.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Spend time praying for God to show you two other people with whom you could share a vision for starting a spiritual conversation group. Take the risk and ask these two if they would be open to exploring your vision by going through the book *How to Start a Q Place* with you.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Through a prayerful process, we can invite people to “come and see,” to discover Jesus for themselves, and to discuss their questions. And then we can accompany them on their journey of growth toward him. On this path of faith and obedience, we get a front row seat to see God’s activity in the life of seekers and in our own lives.

## QPlace STORY

Laurie had grown up going to church, and had reverence for its rituals and traditions. It never occurred to her to express any doubts or concerns about what she was taught there. In fact, she was told she should not question anything about God, church doctrine, the Bible or “the rules.” But Laurie did have doubts and questions. She wasn’t sure she believed everything. She just learned to suppress her skepticism at church.

When Laurie got married and had children, her husband didn’t go to church and discouraged her from going as well. She still believed in God and prayed to him, but felt isolated in her faith and didn’t know where to turn. When her coworker invited her to a Q Place, she immediately said yes. There were others in the group who were exploring their questions about God. No one was judging them as they shared different opinions about what they believed or didn’t

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* by George Hunter III (Abingdon Press)
- *How to Start a Q Place* by Mary Schaller (Q Place)
- *Life Groups at Cedar Hills* by Eric Rust (CreateSpace)
- *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Zondervan)
- *Seeker Small Groups* by Garry Poole (Zondervan)

believe. Laurie found it to be a safe place to talk about faith matters with others on a similar journey. The facilitators made sure that people were respected and valued as they honestly shared their thoughts and encouraged everyone to think for themselves.

After a year of meeting regularly, Laurie said she had learned so much about God and the Bible that she didn’t know before. She hadn’t understood how important it was to believe in Jesus and to invite him into her life. Prior to the group, she didn’t understand much of Jesus’ teaching at all. Laurie began reading her Bible every day. At the end of the year, when each person was asked what the group meant to them, Laurie said, “This group has taught me to think and search the Bible for myself about what I believe and why!” As a result, Laurie understands more about God, and she is now regularly back in church worshipping him.



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3. In a small group of Christians wanting to grow in these practices
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***Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.***

# HOW CAN WE SUSTAIN A HEALTHY GROUP?

## the **big** idea

Guidelines and curriculum, with the Holy Spirit's guidance, can make a tremendous difference in how well a group starts and grows.

## ice breaker

Describe a small group experience you've had. Was it a positive or negative experience? Why? Were there any ground rules for how the group functioned? How did you choose what you discussed in the group?

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## related **Scripture**

*For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

Hebrews 4:12 (NIV)

## challenging **wisdom**

*To what greater inspiration and counsel can we turn than to the imperishable truth to be found in this Treasure House, the BIBLE?*

– Queen Elizabeth

*Having a shared understanding of how group members should relate to each other can be a leader's best friend. I have been in lots of groups over the years both as a participant and as a facilitator. Many times I have seen group guidelines used to bring loving correction or guidance to a group that needed it.*

– Eric Rust

## FOLLOW THE TOUR GUIDE

Traveling to an unfamiliar place is exciting, but it can also be intimidating. A multi-billion dollar tourist industry has been designed to cater to the traveler who is ready to discover new places but needs the help of people who are familiar with the chosen destination.

If there's a group traveling together, a good travel agent will often arrange for a knowledgeable tour guide, a skilled bus driver, and a bus to travel to the places you'll see. In this way you can maximize the enjoyment of your experience, seeing the best sights and learning a lot more. It's often more fun and less stressful traveling together when everyone can rely on the tour guide, the bus driver, and a safe vehicle to take you where you want to go.

What if facilitating a small group for spiritually curious people were a lot like taking people on a traveling bus tour?

People are willing to “get on the bus,” which in this case is a small group, because they trust you and accept your invitation. The desired destination for participants in a Q Place is to see for themselves what is true about God and the Bible. The vehicle (or bus) is the content (curriculum) you discuss that gets you to the destination. The group guidelines are traffic laws that keep everyone on the “road” without crashing.

**1 DISCUSS ::** In the analogy of a tour bus, what do you think is your role in facilitating a small group: travel agent, tour guide, or bus driver? Explain your answer.

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In the bus tour analogy, it's natural to identify small group facilitators as the tour guides. The premise is that they need to have all of the knowledge about the various topics that their group will discuss over time, operating as mini-teachers in charge of the group. Yet how frightening that might be for ordinary Christians who don't have a seminary degree or serious Bible training.

Instead of being like a tour guide, what if the facilitator is more like the bus driver? The bus driver does need skills to drive the bus, keeping everyone inside safe from harm and minding the rules of the road. But the tour guide tells the bus driver where to go and when to slow down so that the group can take notice of something important.

So who is the tour guide, if it is not the facilitator? The Holy Spirit knows exactly what participants need next in their spiritual journey. He is the one guiding the group, showing what there is to learn about God and the Bible along the way. Unlike people on a bus tour, though, participants in this kind of small group don't necessarily recognize the direction of the Holy Spirit. That's one reason why it's much more effective to start a group with three "bus drivers" instead of just one. As a triad, you seek guidance from the Holy Spirit together, and he works through all three of you to facilitate the group. (For more about triads, see *The Art of Facilitating 7.2: How Can We Lead with Three?*)

**2 DISCUSS ::** What do you think are the main advantages of giving the Holy Spirit the role of "tour guide"? How might that be challenging for you?

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A Q Place is a group that is small enough and safe enough for people to talk openly about spiritual questions, to explore the Bible and the life of Jesus, and to wrestle with what they really believe. It's an adventure that leads to powerful discoveries. There are three crucial elements: (1) trained facilitators, (2) time-tested guidelines, and (3) inductive curriculum. The first three Art of Facilitating sessions (7.1, 7.2, and 7.3) focus on training to facilitate a Q Place. In this session (7.4), we explore the value of using time-tested guidelines and inductive curriculum to facilitate a group.

### ESTABLISH PROVEN GUIDELINES

Imagine riding on a road with no speed limit or traffic laws. While some might enjoy unbridled freedom, it could be

terrifying. When you invite a diverse group people to come and talk together about spiritual matters, they are likely to be uneasy and wonder if it's a risky proposition—whether they will be judged or put down for what they believe. People relax when there are some ground rules to guide the discussions, maintain a safe environment, and respect each person's opinions and time.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Why do you think discussion guidelines might be attractive to people joining a group to talk about spiritual matters?

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Q Place guidelines have been developed and time-tested by thousands of small groups. They give comfort and confidence to people who probably haven't experienced this kind of discussion before. When a new group is starting, give everyone a Q Place Guidelines Card, available at [QPlace.com](http://QPlace.com). Read together through the guidelines and discussion tips so that everyone understands the nature of the group and the tips for healthy discussions. Periodically you can ask the group how well they feel you're all following the guidelines and discuss areas for improvement. Encourage everyone to keep each other on track.

One of the basic guidelines is to begin and end on time. Another reminds everyone "not to judge others." Each person knows that he or she can share a belief that won't be judged or immediately "fixed" by a well-meaning facilitator or participant. When there is acceptance and respect regardless of opinions shared, everyone can feel safe to honestly express themselves in the group discussions.

**4 DISCUSS ::** Read the Q Place guidelines. (See Appendix A.) Which of the basic guidelines do you think would be most difficult for you to implement when leading a group? Why?

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### USE INDUCTIVE CURRICULUM THAT POINTS TO THE BIBLE

When using the inductive (self-discovery) learning approach in a small group, people can discover truth for themselves through good questions and group discussion. The

facilitator’s job is not to teach or dispense information or knowledge, but help the group discuss spiritual topics and questions that group participants care about.

If you are not teaching, then how are people learning and growing in their understanding of God in these ongoing discussions? It may start with very simple questions—icebreaker type questions that encourage people to share honest thoughts about life and to discover that the group will be a nonthreatening place to explore what they believe.

When the group communicates specific needs or questions about God, you may suggest a related topic that the group could focus on and discuss. To support topical discussions, it really helps to have a discussion guide or a video resource that keys into those questions.

Here are two helpful criteria for choosing any discussion resources for your group:

1. Is the material inductive, promoting self-discovery by asking open-ended, discussion-producing questions?
2. Does the curriculum point participants to the Bible and to Jesus?

Getting people into the Bible is the best vehicle for reaching the ultimate destination of knowing God personally through Jesus Christ. People are often ambivalent or even resistant to the Bible, but it’s the best source we have for understanding God’s plan, purpose, and love for us. The greatest story of all time, it is the living word of God that can expose our need for him better than any mirror. The author of Hebrews declares,

*The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* Hebrews 4:12 (NIV)

**5 DISCUSS ::** How have you experienced the living, active power of the Bible in your own life?

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Why do you think it might be important to have spiritually curious people explore its contents directly?

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If your group participants are ready to look at what the Bible says, together choose a book of the Bible that is likely to answer the main questions the group is asking. If they

are curious about Jesus, study the Gospel of Mark, which is the shortest and simplest account of his life and teachings. Q Place has a discussion guide that is filled with open-ended questions and breaks down Mark into 16 studies.

There are many great authors and books out there about God and the Bible, along with great teachers on video. But often they become the main text rather than the Bible itself. Getting participants to look directly at the Bible over time is the most powerful tool you have in transforming the human heart.

**6 DISCUSS ::** Why do you think using inductive questions is beneficial?

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When you start a small group for ongoing spiritual conversations with people who believe differently, it is important to know where your group is going, always attentive to the Holy Spirit’s guidance and the group participants’ freedom along the way. Using time-tested guidelines and inductive curriculum that points participants to the Bible are two of your best tools for spiritual growth.

**7 PRACTICE ::** Form a small group of at least three people for this exercise. With one of you facilitating, go through the Q Place guidelines and discuss the following questions together:

How does believing in God affect your everyday life?

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Your purpose in life?

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How you view people?

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Your work life?

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Your finances?

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Questions are taken from Daniel Hill’s *Following After God: What Difference Does God Make?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

When you are in a group of three or more this week, ask if you could practice facilitating a conversation about God as a part of an assignment you have. Using the final practice in this module, go through the guidelines and then discuss those questions.

When you have discussed the questions for about 30 minutes, ask the participants how they think it went:

- Did it feel safe to talk openly about those questions?
- What did you learn that was helpful?
- How do you think I did in facilitating the discussion?
- Would you ever consider doing it again? Why or why not?

## QPlace STORY

When Marla started a Q Place with her two Christian friends, Julie and Katie, the group of twelve chose the inductive discussion guide *How Do We Know God Exists?* from the seven-part Tough Questions series written by Garry Poole and Judson Poling. The discussions were lively and diverse in opinion.

Right at the very beginning, Marla and her co-facilitators introduced a set of discussion guidelines. Everyone appreciated knowing how the group would run: that no one was an expert, that everyone would discover answers for themselves through the reading and informal discussions, that they would take turns asking the questions, and that they would not attempt to resolve all differences of opinion, showing respect toward others.

Over time, the group grew, and after regularly discussing a few Bible verses each week that were embedded in the discussion guide,

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

With guidelines and inductive curriculum, group participants have the freedom to explore God and the Bible at their own pace and interest. Guidelines help a group stay on track so that participants feel it's safe to be honest and open.

Inductive curriculum enables participants to explore and discover the truth about God for themselves through the work of the Holy Spirit and the powerful, living word of God.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *How to Start a Q Place* by Mary Schaller (Q Place)
- *How to Lead a Seeker Bible Study* by Rebecca Manley Pippert (InterVarsity)
- *Life Groups @ CHC* by Eric Rust (Plaudit Press)
- *Tough Questions* by Gary Poole and Judson Poling (Zondervan)

Marla asked if anyone would like to study the Bible directly. About half of the women said they'd like to study the Bible.

Since Julie and Katie were interested in facilitating those Bible discussions, one of them stopped at a Christian bookstore and picked up a discussion guide on the Gospel of John. But after a few weeks in the study, Julie and Katie noticed people weren't coming to the group. They started calling people to find out why, and they were surprised to hear that no one liked the study guide. "Why?" they asked. "Because it doesn't let us think for ourselves" was their reply. "The questions seem like they expect a certain answer, not leaving room for discussion and thought." With that feedback, Julie and Katie started writing their own inductive questions that produced lively discussions once again, and their group participants returned.



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# The Art of Serving Together

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**8.1 WHY SERVE TOGETHER?**

**8.2 WHY DON'T WE SERVE TOGETHER?**

**8.3 WHAT IS SERVING TOGETHER?**

**8.4 HOW CAN WE MAXIMIZE SERVING TOGETHER?**





# WHY SERVE TOGETHER?

## the **big** idea

Serving with spiritual seekers can help them experience God’s love and truth in action, deepen relationships, and open up vibrant discussions about life and God.

## **ice breaker**

Describe a time when you worked together with friends on a service project. What impact did it have on you personally? What impact did it have on the relationships with your friends?

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## **related Scripture**

*For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you...*

1 Thessalonians 1:4-8 (NIV)

## **challenging wisdom**

*More people have been brought into the church by the kindness of real Christian love than by all the theological arguments in the world.*

– William Barclay

## THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

Marshall McLuhan was one of the most influential communication theorists of the 20th century. Regarding media, he coined the phrase *the medium is the message*. What exactly did he mean by that?

A medium is a vehicle through which something is communicated or conveyed. Television is one way to communicate a message and radio is another. McLuhan believed that the *means* or *medium* of communication was intimately related to how the message is perceived. He believed that the way a message was communicated had as much to say as the message itself. Therefore, the same message would be perceived differently if it were received through television versus through a person you knew.

This concept becomes profound when you consider the medium that God used to communicate his message to mankind—the incarnation! Jesus was the perfect medium—God in the flesh, dwelling among us, full of grace and truth—communicating God himself in everything he did.

What a paradox that the means that God now uses to share the message of the good news of Jesus to the world—is us! In all of our imperfections and failings, we are God’s choice for communicating himself to people who are not yet in relationship with him.

And what does this have to do with serving together with our spiritually curious friends and neighbors? So often we think of sharing the gospel as an oral exercise. But God didn’t just redeem our mouths, he redeemed all of us. And our relationship with God speaks most clearly when every part of our lives is involved, not just our speech.

**1 DISCUSS ::** When have you learned something about God through a means other than oral or written communication?

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The idea of serving people in order to communicate God’s grace is hardly novel. “Bringing the whole gospel to the whole person” marks both contemporary missional churches and long-standing mission organizations. Yet, if we limit ourselves to serving people in order to demonstrate God’s love for others, we may be ignoring an even more loving, authentic, and dynamic approach—serving together *with* them.

### JESUS MODELED SERVING TOGETHER

In several memorable scenes, Jesus asked people to participate in the work that he was doing even though they did not yet understand who he was. He asked wedding servants to fill 30-gallon pots with water when the wine had run out. He asked a Samaritan woman to give him a drink from a well in the heat of the day. He told a lame man to carry his mat, a blind man to go wash clay from his eyes, and mourners to remove a stone from a cave and unwrap the dead man who came out of it.<sup>1</sup>

Why did Jesus ask people to take part in the action when he was about to reveal more of the grace, power, and love of God? Clearly, obedience to his commands reveals faith; and throughout the gospels, Jesus acts in response to faith. But action on Jesus’ behalf may also prepare people to understand more of who he is.

Jesus’ disciples regularly showed that they didn’t understand who Jesus was and what Jesus was calling them to. They often argued about who would be the greatest, they misunderstood what Jesus was really up to, and were regularly annoyed with crowds of people, even once sending children away who had come to see Jesus.

As you read the following account, notice all the ways that Jesus involves these imperfect followers, who had not yet come to a personal decision about who Jesus really was:

*When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.*

*Philip answered him, “It would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”*

*Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, “Here is a boy with five small*

*barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”*

*Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.*

*When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. John 6:5-13 (NIV)*

**2 DISCUSS ::** In what ways did Jesus make the feeding of this vast crowd a hands-on experience of serving together?

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What part of this event would have gripped you the most if you had been serving?

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Jesus had a much more profound purpose in mind than filling the stomachs of a multitude of people. This is evident through the last half of John 6, when Jesus reveals a message so difficult that it becomes a point of decision for many who turn away and leave. The message begins with “*I am the bread of life*” and culminates when Peter speaks for most of the Twelve, expressing a new understanding and faith:

*“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.” John 6:68-69 (NIV)*

<sup>1</sup> See John 2:7-8, 4:7; Mark 2:11; John 9:7, 11:44.

**3 DISCUSS ::** How might the action of serving together have helped Jesus' disciples come to the conclusion they did about Jesus?

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### BENEFITS OF SERVING TOGETHER

We tend to think that we should serve people in order to demonstrate God's love, and then if they become Christians, they can join us. This order seems appropriate because if they serve with us before they are saved, they may misunderstand and think that serving is contributing to their salvation.

Yet we can trust the work of the Spirit in the lives of people who are working alongside us so that the gospel comes *not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction* (1 Thessalonians 1:5, NIV). It's not just spoken, it's modeled.

Hugh Halter talks about it this way in his book *The Tangible Kingdom*:

The incarnational big-story gospel will require a place of discovery, where people will be able to *see the truth* before they hear about it. This place will not be a location but a community of people who are inclusive of everyone. These people will make eternity attractive by how they live such selfless lives now, and will be modeling life in a New Kingdom in ways that will make it easy for other people to give it a try.<sup>2</sup>

**4 DISCUSS ::** Have you ever done a service project with non-Christians? Describe your experience.

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If you have not, what barriers or fears might hold you back?

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Inviting individuals to serve with you is a loving and welcoming act. Rather than communicating that others are inferior, with little to offer, it shows that you value their contributions as equal, active parts of a group. And beyond enabling people to feel included and connected, it provides an opportunity for you to affirm their unique, God-given abilities.

Your friends who seem the least interested in discussing God and the Bible may jump at the chance to come with you to serve at a food pantry, assist in disaster relief, or join a community recycling project. Serving together invites people into a relational environment where they can belong so that they may see and feel the gospel being lived out. Once they see it, they may become more curious and more willing to talk about it. When you welcome someone to serve with you, your experience together gains new dimensions, increasing common ground and opening up the potential for meaningful conversations about God.

What happens when people serve together with you? They experience life with you, troubleshooting the same circumstances, feeling the same griefs and burdens. The shared experience provides something worthwhile to talk about. There's a natural debriefing time that may organically open up into a conversation about life and God. And when you spend worthwhile time together with people who may share little else in common with you, they just may catch a glimpse of Jesus.

As we serve alongside people who don't yet know Jesus, they get to experience the difference that Jesus has made in our lives. By God's grace, they will see his character shining through us. But even when the pressure is on, and we are weak and fail, the message of the gospel can speak clearly when we are honest about our need for forgiveness. The medium of service creates opportunities to share the gospel. By demonstrating the good news, we may earn the right to talk about it.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Do you think that serving together with others who believe differently than you might give you opportunities to talk about God? Why or why not?

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

In the next week, identify a need in your community, neighborhood, or workplace. Find one or two other Christians to pray together for people you each know who are probably not yet followers of Jesus, but who might be willing to work together for the good cause that you have identified. Within the next month, invite those individuals to join with you in planning and carrying out a simple activity that will help meet that need.

After serving together, take 15-30 minutes to debrief and celebrate with this team. Journal your experience.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Engaging in serving experiences with spiritual seekers provides the opportunity to show God's love to them, grow our own faith, build greater trust, and deepen our relationships. By participating in service with you, your spiritually curious friends are provided the opportunity to experience and encounter God in a fresh way.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *God Space* by Doug Pollock (Group Publishing Inc.)
- *The Tangible Kingdom* by Hugh Halter (Jossey-Bass)
- *Toxic Charity* by Robert D. Lupton (HarperCollins Publishing)

## QPlace STORY

Kathy came into her Q Place one day with a heavy heart for her neighbor Virginia. Virginia's husband, Carlos, had been unemployed for several months, and their six-year-old son, Luis, had bone cancer. Though Virginia had a job cleaning houses for a living, they had no health insurance and she often had to miss work to take Luis to doctor appointments and cancer treatments while Carlos watched the other two children. Life seemed overwhelming to Virginia and Carlos as they watched their son battle cancer and their little life savings dwindle to nothing.

Kathy's Q Place was still relatively new, having met together each week for less than a year to discuss questions about God and the Bible. She wondered if this group could help Virginia and her husband in tangible ways. When she asked the group what they thought,

everyone jumped in to help. Beginning that very day, one of the women began organizing meals for the family. Another volunteered to babysit Virginia's other two children while she was working and when she had chemotherapy treatments with Luis. Another person was able to help Carlos get a job by introducing him to someone at her church. And in the group they began praying regularly for this struggling family.

Virginia's family was overwhelmed with gratitude for how this small group helped them. One of Kathy's Q Place facilitators commented that their group's discussions about God really came to life as they served together. Beyond just talking about God, they were actually experiencing the character of God as he used them to surround Carlos and Virginia's family with his love and care.



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# WHY DON'T WE SERVE TOGETHER?

## the **big** idea

With some helpful antidotes, you can dissolve the obstacles that block your intention of serving together with people who believe differently.

### **ice breaker**

Who is a hero of yours that serves others in the name of Christ (other than Mother Teresa)? What is it about that person that inspires you?

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### **related Scripture**

*You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?...Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

Matthew 5:13-16 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*Today's typical outsiders aren't likely to be reached through persuasive argument but instead through first experiencing an authentic Christian: someone who is willing to roll up his or her sleeves and restore alongside them.*

– Gabe Lyons

## FLAVORLESS SALT AND HIDDEN LIGHT?

When the communists took over Russia in 1917, they vigorously persecuted the church but did not make Christianity illegal. In the Constitution of 1918, Article 13 guaranteed freedom of religion. But Article 16 established that only the Soviet Republic would render “material and all other assistance to the workers and poorest peasants,”<sup>1</sup> effectively making it illegal for Christians to do any good works.

In his book *The Externally Focused Church*, Eric Swanson notes that *because* the church in Russia could no longer feed the hungry or take care of the sick or the orphans, within 70 years the church in Russia was irrelevant. “Take away service, and you take away the church’s power, influence, and evangelistic effectiveness. The power of the gospel is combining its life-changing message with selfless service.”<sup>2</sup>

**1 DISCUSS ::** If you were banned by law from doing good works, what is one act of service that you absolutely could not stop doing or supporting? Why?

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In Romans 15:17-19, the apostle Paul was full of enthusiasm about all that Christ Jesus had done through him, *bringing the Gentiles to God by my message and by the way I worked among them* (NLT). The Spirit of God worked through Paul’s words and actions as he *fully presented the Good News of Christ*. Paul is a powerful example of what Jesus told his followers—that they would be like salt and light for people around them.

Now, in 21st-century America, are people experiencing Christians as salt and light? Researcher Brené Brown, a popular TED Talk presenter, talks about the “disengagement gap”—the space between what we *practice* on a daily basis and what we *profess*. She says that when non-Christians observe us, as Christians, out of alignment with the core values we profess, such as loving and serving our neighbor, they conclude that we do not have integrity or credibility. If we don't close this “gap,” we will continue to turn people off to the gospel.

Serving together is a powerful way to live out our values in the presence of seekers and to close the gap so that the impact of our message increases. Imagine if Christians' actions shined a bright light, illuminating the beauty of the gospel, sparking curiosity, and opening up the opportunity for the exchange of life-giving words? And what if we invited people who believe differently to join us in serving, and they got the opportunity to see Jesus up close, in action through us? They would taste the salt and see the light shining, and they would probably want more.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Today, in our society, what kinds of actions will help people believe that what we say about Jesus is true?

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### THREE BARRIERS TO SERVING TOGETHER

The opportunity for us to serve others, and to serve together with others, is wide open; we aren't living under legal restrictions from serving. But there are still barriers that hinder us from getting started and from serving together well once we're going. As we plan, we will need to surrender our tendency toward our three biggest barriers to serving together: *individualism*, *materialism*, and *consumerism*.

#### 1. Individualism

Individualism is the “I'm the super hero; I will change the world by myself, my way” syndrome. With our message that emphasizes a personal decision for Jesus, we can often confuse the reality of “personal” faith with the error of “individual” faith, and this spills over into how we serve our world. Add to this our American ethos of individualism and ever-expanding technology that supports independence, and the value of an interdependent faith community continues to diminish.

#### 2. Materialism

This is the “My value is measured by what I own” syndrome. By focusing our lives on what we possess, we lose out on the vital connection that happens when we find our value in what we give, and in how rich we are relationally.

#### 3. Consumerism

This is the “Get as much as you can” syndrome. When we value life for what we can get out of it, we become self-absorbed, measuring material goods, experiences, and even people by how they serve us.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Which of the three barriers is the most significant for you in relation to serving together with others? Explain your answer.

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You might refer to these barriers as “Me, Mine, More.” Resolving to move beyond them requires taking some risks. Our cherished comfort, security, safety, and convenience will be challenged. We will have to trust in something other than our own efforts, our wealth, or our ability to get ahold of more.

Serving itself requires us to move out of our comfortable routines to be touched by the needs of other people. Minimally, it's inconvenient. Frequently it involves uncertainty, discomfort, and a steep learning curve. On top of that, serving with people who themselves have spiritual needs for which they haven't yet found the answer adds another dimension of risk. We become the subjects of others' 360° observations in situations with little control, under increased pressure, and where we don't have all the answers. Formidable challenges—and insurmountable if we keep living the “Me, Mine, More” mindset.

Yet if we dissolve the three barriers and face these challenges, serving together can become a doorway to fulfilling our purpose—as lights that lead people to glorify God.

### OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO SERVING TOGETHER

While the barriers are daunting, there are three antidotes that can overcome them.

### Antidote for Individualism

Our tendency to want personal recognition, to take credit, and to pass blame can be solved through humility and relational engagement. It follows in the wake of asking the question, “How can we do this *together*?” *We* replaces *me*.

Serving with people who believe differently means that you're on a team with blended worldviews and varying approaches to life. Predictably, navigating the logistics of making decisions is more complex. You have to be intentional about trying suggestions from the group and learning together rather than being the expert who dictates. When you make mistakes under pressure—and everybody does—your honest apology restores trust and reinvigorates a spirit of cooperation.

Relinquishing the desire for personal glory is the most crucial step. All must experience the success of the team rather than focusing on individual successes. Members must become dependent on each other, caring for each other and for the people served by the team.

Ed Stetzer, a church-planting expert, maintains that “you win people *to* what you win them *with*.” The loving community with Christ and his people that we want them to join is also the mechanism for drawing them there.

**4 DISCUSS ::** Describe a time when you were working with a group and were faced with the temptation to push for your own way. What did you do, and what was the result?

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### Antidote for Materialism

Our tendency to accumulate and focus on “stuff” can be countered by generosity: giving of our time, talent, and treasures. We can wonder, not how to get the best, but, “What’s the best I can give away?” *Ours* or *yours* eventually replaces *mine*. Our focus can shift from what we have to the value of relationships and to serving and growing together.

Gabe Lyons puts it this way: “When communities serve together, they experience connection and purpose, and are reminded that this life is not about them. Serving is one of the clearest ways the concept of restoration begins to manifest itself in our world.”<sup>3</sup>

**5 DISCUSS ::** Describe a time when you secretly gave a gift of your time, talent, or money. What was meaningful to you about your involvement with that gift?

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### Antidote for Consumerism

The path out of our consumer mentality is to live a sacrificial life: giving our lives away, showing up for others, and focusing on what they need. It’s to live daily asking the question, “How can I let go of my agenda to benefit everyone else?” *Sacrifice for others* replaces *more for me*.

Speaking of the impact of teams engaged in service, Lyons writes:

When serving together—whether ministering to one another or those outside their community—[people] are forced to sacrifice, be inconvenienced, and demolish walls. They get to know one another in ways they wouldn’t have to if they just sat around in a friendly circle talking. It is in the *doing* that they come alive, their gifts are exposed, and their hearts are opened to one another. Serving others together is the key ingredient in creating community.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, once we become convinced that the rewards are worth the risks, we will make the effort to join with others, give more freely, and joyfully sacrifice whatever it takes so that serving with others is a regular part of our lifestyle as followers of Christ. In humble dependence on God, we will find that we start to “believe differently”; our “Me, Mine, More” mindset will dissolve and our hearts will come into alignment with God’s design for us.

**6 PRACTICE ::** As a group, brainstorm a plan to serve with people who believe differently. You could initiate a service opportunity as a group or take people along with you to a service event already in progress. Once you have agreed on a plan, hold each other accountable to follow through with the action items needed to accomplish the plan.

<sup>3</sup> Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2012), 159.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

This week, find a way to integrate serving together with others into a regular weekly or monthly routine.

Notice how obstacles may relate to the “Me, Mine, More” mindset, and deal with them head-on.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

To serve together with people who believe differently, you must overcome barriers in getting started and obstacles along the way. When you break the “Me, Mine, More” patterns to serve together with others, Jesus’ inviting light shines into our dark world.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Conspiracy of Kindness* by Steve Sjogren (Bethany House)
- *The Hole in Our Gospel: What Does God Expect of Us?* by Richard Stearns (Thomas Nelson)
- *The Next Christians* by Gabe Lyons (Multnomah Books)
- *Unfinished: Believing Is Only the Beginning* by Richard Stearns (Thomas Nelson)

## QPlace STORY

After a financial crisis, a friend of Georgia’s had to move out of her home, and Georgia mobilized people from her church to help the family pack their moving truck. Rudy and Simone, from Georgia’s church, decided to help with the moving effort and extended an invitation to a couple of seeking friends to join them. They knew that serving together would enable their friends to meet and get to know other followers of Christ.

As they carried boxes and packed up the truck together, sometime during the day the couple became curious about this group of people, their motivation, and their church. They began to ask questions of their

fellow-workers. The couple had very little church history but had plenty of preconceived opinions about Christians and church. They asked questions like “Why would they do something like this?” “Is everyone at their church as kind as them?” “What would we have to wear to church if we went?” “What does church look like for these people?”

At the end of the experience, everyone extended an invitation to the new couple to join them again to serve or to come to church. Two weeks later, this couple walked into the church’s Sunday service and was warmly greeted by familiar faces. They already felt like they belonged.



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# WHAT IS SERVING TOGETHER?

## the big idea

Meaningfully serving together with people who believe differently is built on relationships and builds relationships.

## ice breaker

Describe a meaningful time growing up when your family or a group of friends worked together on a project.

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## related Scripture

*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*

John 15:4-5 (ESV)

## challenging wisdom

*In meeting the needs of others and serving alongside them, we cannot help but create relationship. Relationship is the key to building bridges in the community.*

– Rick Rusaw

## A PICTURE OF SERVING TOGETHER

The storm hit suddenly. Within no time at all streets and businesses were flooded. One building was hit particularly hard. What made it worse was that a single mom had just moved there from New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. Kylah stood in her front yard sobbing as her kids' belongings floated around in the basement, the whole building surrounded by water.

Moved with compassion, a Christian who knew of Kylah's situation called a bunch of neighbors. Delaying their own cleanup, they pumped the water out of Kylah's basement, cleaned up the mess, and secured new furniture and clothes for her and her family. It took all day. But as they waded through the water together, they laughed, solved problems, and cheered each other on.

When the day was over, Kylah was blessed with a new set of neighbors. All of them felt that they had done something significant. But the most important outcome was that people got to know each other in ways they hadn't known each other before. Not only did they make a difference in one person's

life, they did it together.

Serving together is a powerful way to engage with different people, forging strong relationships over a common cause. Taking many different forms, this art involves welcoming people to join us in purposeful, beneficial activities. Meaningful conversation flows more naturally as the task at hand is in the spotlight—not our differences. Winsome interactions about God can be a very natural part of the shared experience. In the process, Jesus is on display.

**1 DISCUSS ::** Describe how an experience in which you were serving with someone enabled you to grow closer.

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Serving together can be as simple as intentionally asking a friend to help you move furniture or to prepare a meal for someone who could use some help. It could be inviting neighbors to volunteer with you in a local community project. You could also go alone to volunteer in an area for which God has given you a passion, and watch for ways to build relationships with people who are already serving there. In a Q Place, you can bring up the idea of doing something as a group to benefit others, and then work out all the details together.

Your church community can take service to a new level by inviting people who don't yet know Jesus to come and join in. As you serve in the strength and authority of the Lord, both those who are being served and those who are serving alongside can personally experience God's love and power.

**2 DISCUSS ::** What if Jesus were to walk into the room right now and tell you to come with him? In your community, where do you think he would take you first? Why would he take you there? Who else would he invite to come with him?

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## SERVING TOGETHER IS BUILT ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Jesus made it crystal clear to his disciples that they would be powerless to produce good results in any effort unless they were constantly relying on him, just as a branch gets all of its nourishment and power from a vine (John 15:4-5). This is what you need if you want people to see Jesus in your life. As you serve with them, they will then experience the fruit of his Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—coming through you. That fruit brings real blessing and makes people curious. But only by being in communion with and dependent on Jesus will you have that ability to pique others' curiosity. A boring, lifeless, critical, or stress-filled Christian is hardly going to make a seeker wonder how he or she can have that kind of life.

**3 DISCUSS ::** What do you believe God has done recently in your life that would make a seeker look at you and want to have what you have? How could you share that in a winsome way?

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## SERVING TOGETHER INVOLVES BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE YOU SERVE WITH AND WITH THOSE YOU SERVE

When a church near Chicago decided to serve with a ministry called Feed My Starving Children, they recognized that many of their nonchurched friends, neighbors, and co-workers were looking for ways to do something meaningful in the world, so they invited them to join in.

In a room filled with people of all ages, Christians served alongside those who weren't as sure about all this church stuff. They watched a powerful video, listened carefully to instructions, and danced to music as they worked, trying to pack more food than the groups before them. As they worked together, people got to know one another in a way that would be unusual in a church setting. Old friendships deepened and new ones quickly formed in a way that would not have happened in a typical church setting.

Serving together changes the atmosphere of a relationship. Barriers crumble and a special bond is formed when people pursue a common cause together. Serving together changes the spiritual atmosphere of a relationship; barriers are broken down and bridges of trust are built.

One of the ways you can deepen relationships among people around you is to find out what they are passionate about. You may find a common interest, but as you consider a place to suggest serving together, be willing to put their interests and desires above your own. You can open up the conversation by asking them a question such as one of these:

1. If your employer offered you an opportunity to take 80 hours of work time to do paid community service—serving anywhere in the world—what would you do? Why would that be your choice?

2. What causes have you heard about (e.g., modern-day slavery, racial discrimination, sex trafficking, homelessness, illiteracy) and donated money or given time to? Why do those particular issues interest you?

**4 DISCUSS ::** How would you answer the previous questions? Who is a seeker you know who may have similar preferences or passions?

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3. From your childhood, what experience did you have in serving someone that meant a lot to you? What made it meaningful?
4. Based on your personality, what would be an ideal way to volunteer your time and energy? On the following continuums, place an “X” where you see yourself. (Note that neither side is “right” but rather a matter of preference.)

Highly structured program-----Grassroots, limited oversight  
 Recruiting/motivating others-----Hands-on, task-oriented  
 Studying/learning about issues-----Taking action  
 Helping older people-----Helping younger people  
 High drama and risk-----Quiet, behind the scenes



**ASSESS**

Take time to complete the continuum shown above.

Who is a seeker you know who may have similar preferences or passions?

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When you find a place and begin serving together, you’ll learn a lot more about each other. Those you’re serving with will be watching you, both in how you plan and how you carry out plans. How you serve sends a message of credibility—or lack of it—especially for the people you work alongside. Consider the following practical guidelines for serving:

**1. Meet Genuine Needs**

Make sure you’re really helping with a true need. Maybe you’ve heard the story of the barn in Appalachia that gets painted several times every year by enthusiastic youth groups who come to “serve”—only to be given busy work by their leaders who don’t seek out the real needs of the community. Meaningful service must be preceded by dialogue—listening to needs, asking probing questions, and responding humbly to those involved.

**2. Empower People You Serve**

When you’re preparing to serve someone who is in material need, it’s important to ask not just what people need, but what they bring to the table—how they might actually lead you, not be led by you. As Steve Corbett counsels in *When Helping Hurts*, our natural inclination is to focus on people’s needs. But a better start is to focus on the question, “What is right with you?” . . . By asking the poor to tell you what they have, it returns their personal sense of power, gives them their own voice, their own vision, and begins the healing process.”<sup>1</sup>

**3. Give Them Ownership**

Rather than “riding in on a white horse to rescue the unfortunate,” your service is a way to come alongside people who need a partner, not a patron. They are not helpless. Plan your work so that you are eventually not needed, or at least your leadership is not needed because those involved have taken the reins.

**4. Make It Sustainable**

Consider ways to be involved over time, not just in a one-time burst. Also consider ways not just to “infuse” help from the outside but to invite those who are helped to give back in some way. It both dignifies the effort and practically supports it.

**5. Preserve (or Build) Dignity**

A person who is in need typically feels shame or a sense of being “less than.” Ironically, one of the ways they may deal with this is trying not to show it; they may actually appear ungrateful or resentful. Do not be surprised by this reaction. Do what you can to make sure you remove all traces of condescension; allow the person to feel their own worth even through their hardship.

When picking and organizing your serving opportunity, these relational principles will guide you so that you can make the largest impact, both on those you’re serving and those you’re serving with. It’s a powerful testimony for everyone.

<sup>1</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012), 120.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Every day this week, ask God to fill you with his passion and direction for someone you could serve—and serve with.

Ask at least one coworker, neighbor, or friend one of the four suggested questions and see how that person responds.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Relationships are at the core of meaningful service together. Our relationship with God fills our efforts. Our relationships with those who believe differently are strengthened by serving together, opening the way to spiritual conversations.

Our relationships with those in need help us to serve well—with the focus off ourselves—so that people we serve and serve with can experience God’s love and the reality of a relationship with him.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert (Moody Publishers)
- *God Space* by Doug Pollock (Group Publishing Inc.)
- *The Tangible Kingdom* by Hugh Halter (Jossey-Bass)
- *Toxic Charity* by Robert D. Lupton (HarperCollins Publishing)

## QPlace STORY

Less than two blocks from John’s home, Muslim refugees had been settled into subsidized housing by a local relief agency. For some time, John had been involved with a variety of projects in urban settings. God had stirred his heart to serve in a way that he could sustain over time. So when he heard about an opportunity to tutor the children of these families, he signed up. For the next several years John partnered with Scott, one of the leaders of the program, and mentored six Muslim boys, sharing many experiences as they grew into young men. Scott and John prayed regularly for opportunities to introduce their young friends to Jesus.

One day, John and Scott invited four of the young men to serve together with them, packing beet seeds for people living in poverty in Zimbabwe. They drove together to the experience and served on a team together, and at the end of the evening, when all of the seed packs were counted, their team had filled the most!

During the drive home, John asked the young men some questions that he had been curious to know. He asked about their faith practices and about how they pray. The boys shared the names and times of each of their five daily prayers to Allah.

Then one of them asked how a Christian prays. The discussion was amazing. The young men wanted to understand who Jesus was to a Christian compared to who he was in their faith.

At the end of the evening, John challenged the young men to explore their faith as they entered adulthood and not just to view it as cultural or biological.

Serving together had naturally opened up a conversation—one that clearly could end up having them meet Jesus—Isa as he is known to them—as their Rescuer and Leader.



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# HOW CAN WE MAXIMIZE SERVING TOGETHER?

## the **big** idea

Advance preparation, meaningful engagement, and a reflective debrief will result in a powerful impact as you serve together with people who believe differently.

## ice breaker

What's the most fruitful and rewarding act of service you've ever been part of? What made it rewarding?

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## related **Scripture**

*As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

1 Peter 2:4-5 (NIV)

## challenging **wisdom**

*When we step out to touch the lost, God's presence meets us and equips us to bring healing. In other words, the kingdom of God flows through those who are open to being dispensers of God's love and presence. . . . God really likes to move through a group that steps out to serve the needs of others.*

– Steve Sjogren

## GETTING READY TO SERVE

The people of ancient Israel would set up stones in places where they had encountered God in meaningful ways. Whenever someone came upon the site, the standing stones would then prompt the question, “What happened here?” However, if a person wasn't present to explain what had happened there, the stones served only as a silent marker to the event.

Scripture describes followers of Jesus as *living stones* (1 Peter 2:4-5). We serve the same purpose as the standing stones of Bible times. But unlike those stones, we can give witness to what Jesus has done in our lives. We are literally “living markers” of God's work in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Going out to serve among the people of our communities gives us a great opportunity to be living stones. Our actions cause people to ask, “What's going on here?” And then when we communicate God's personal love and care for people, our message resonates with authenticity.

**1 DISCUSS ::** When have you participated in serving and found that the experience stirred up important questions about life and God? Explain.

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As we serve together with people who believe differently, there are some things we can do to make the greatest impact both on those being served and on those who are serving. Practically speaking, effective service begins with a useful plan, including several elements:

### 1. Cast Vision

In Luke 9, Jesus casts a clear vision for his disciples as he sends them out: “*When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick*” (9:1-2, NIV).

To focus everyone’s energy in the right direction, make sure you’re all in agreement about what you’re trying to accomplish. Include well-defined time parameters and clearly identified roles and responsibilities. The details will not be a distraction when everyone knows who is doing what and for how long.

### 2. Pray Before You Begin

Use discernment and sensitivity about praying with people you have invited who believe differently. Some may be comfortable joining you in prayer, others may not. Let your relationship guide your judgment. Whether you decide to pray beforehand with the Christians involved or during the experience with everyone, ask God to multiply your efforts so that your actions will introduce people to our God of love and open a way for the Good News to be known.

### 3. Ask Permission

Be respectful in your service of others. What you think needs to be fixed or cleaned up might not be all right with them. Make sure to talk with the people you are planning on serving and tune in to their vision so that what you do really benefits them.

### 4. Plan for Safety

Sometimes in our excitement to serve we put ourselves in dangerous situations or take unnecessary risks. Make sure to think through what it looks like to keep everyone safe while you do the work.

### 5. Have the Right Supplies Ready

It is frustrating to have a crew of passionate workers waiting for someone to come back from the hardware store. Make sure to acquire all of the equipment you need in advance so the momentum stays strong as you serve.

**2 DISCUSS ::** How can effective planning prepare your heart for service?

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There is a caution around advance preparation: Don’t allow your planning to paralyze you. Sometimes we get so hung up on the planning that we never serve. As Jesus sent his disciples out, he told them to take nothing with them—no staff, no bread, no money, and no extra shirt. He wanted

them to get going, and to trust God for what they needed. As we serve in areas that do require preparation, we still need to depend on God and not get bogged down in the process.

**3 DISCUSS ::** In what ways will you have to depend on God as you move out to serve in your community?

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## ENGAGING MEANINGFULLY AS YOU SERVE

Service in the name of Jesus is set apart from service provided for social welfare or personal altruism. Christ-centered service has the potential to transform both those serving and those being served. Jesus calls this transformation *fruit*. Kingdom fruit includes changing lives, breaking down spiritual barriers, and discrediting the enemy’s lies. All this can happen when we pay attention to some simple principles while we are serving:

### 1. Meaningful Involvement

We want everyone to feel that they have contributed to the work in a meaningful way. This means paying attention to gifts, abilities, and skills. (Don’t hand a chain saw to a person who has never used one and doesn’t have the strength to operate it.)

### 2. Continuous Prayer

Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians to *pray without ceasing* (NKJV). Encourage each of the Christians to keep praying while they are working—for safety, team unity, relationships to be built, opportunities for spiritual conversations, and protection from the enemy. Notice how God answers prayers, and as appropriate, share personally with the group as you see him at work.

**4 DISCUSS ::** Talk about a time when your abilities were used in a group to accomplish some greater purpose. How did that make you feel?

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### 3. Spiritual Awareness

When we are serving, we need to stay aware of what is going on in the spiritual realm. Evidence of God’s activity can open

up significant conversations. Conflict that arises could be coming from the enemy. As we seek God in each situation, there is power to break down spiritual barriers erected by the enemy and to enter into life-changing interactions led by the Spirit of God.

One autumn, a group got together to serve in the community. As they raked leaves in an elderly woman's front yard, the owner of the adjacent house came out and angrily rebuked the crew for blowing leaves into his yard. Instead of engaging in a dispute, they simply apologized. After the man went inside, the team recognized the enemy's desire to destroy God's work and decided to rake this man's yard as well, pack his leaves, and pay to have them removed. When he came out again, the only words he could utter were "Thank you."

#### 4. Compelling Quality

When a group serves someone but fails to do the job well, the experience leaves a negative impression and a poor reflection of God's excellent handiwork. When we delight in serving God himself, doing the best job possible, then people we serve with and those we serve may all be compelled by our service—and by our God.

**5 DISCUSS ::** In what specific ways might your service make Christianity compelling both for those serving and those being served?

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#### 5. Gentle Answer

While you are serving with no strings attached, people may ask you why you are doing this. First Peter 3:15 (NIV) tells us, *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.* Remember, you are a "living stone." In advance, think through what your relationship with God means to you, how it affects what you do, and how you would communicate that to individuals serving with you. Thinking through this ahead of time will help you to handle questions when they come and to communicate how deeply God loves and cares for people.

### DEBRIEFING YOUR EXPERIENCE

In Luke 9:10, Jesus welcomes back his followers who have

been driving out demons, healing the sick, and preaching the message of the Kingdom. When they return, Jesus withdraws with them to a small town. There, the disciples report what they have done.

When you reflect with your group about what you each learned, the experience of serving takes on a new level of richness.

**6 DISCUSS ::** What kinds of questions do you think Jesus had for his disciples after returning from serving?

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Debriefing can happen very naturally; for example, you could simply stop together at a place to eat before heading home and throw out a good question as everyone is talking about the event. If it's appropriate for your group, you could have a more clearly defined debriefing time immediately after the event, discussing any of the following questions:

- What part of the experience did you enjoy the most?
- Who is someone new that you met? What did you learn about them?
- What ideas do you have for serving more effectively the next time?
- Did you learn anything about yourself today?
- Did you learn anything about God today?
- Would you say that you were changed? If so, how?
- Would you say that barriers were broken down?
- For the people we served, what do you think was most helpful or meaningful?

When you take time to reflect and discuss your experience, you can more clearly see and understand what transforming work is being done (or not done). Discussing your experience together helps everyone to take notice of things that you learned and to grow—both individually and in your relationships with each other.

**7 PRACTICE ::** Think back to a specific time when you were serving in a group. In pairs, role-play how you might have responded to the question, "Why are you doing this?"

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Plan a simple way to serve someone (for example, collect food or serve at a food pantry, help clean the house of a friend who is ill, volunteer at a local school). Invite a Christian friend and one or two people who believe differently to join you. As you plan, go through this session again and apply the elements that fit well with your opportunity to serve. Carry it out. Then journal and share about the experience with someone in this group.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Serving together with people who believe differently has the potential to raise curiosity for what makes a Christian's life different. Serving together can be a great equalizer: Those who serve and those being served are both humbled by the

presence of God through loving one another as Christ loves and serves us. To serve in a way that unleashes that potential, prepare well, engage meaningfully as you serve together, and take time to talk about the experience afterward.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Conspiracy of Kindness* by Steve Sjogren (Bethany House)
- *The Hole in Our Gospel: What Does God Expect of Us?* by Richard Stearns (Thomas Nelson)
- *Toxic Charity* by Robert D. Lupton (HarperCollins Publishing)
- *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert (Moody Publishers)

## QPlace STORY

A group of Christians regularly served in a homeless ministry, and they often invited people in the community to join them. Several times Pam invited her friend Amy and her family to help serve the guests who would be coming, and finally they agreed to come.

As soon as they arrived, Pam warmly welcomed them, explained how everything worked, and then helped them each settle in to clear-cut roles for the evening. Amy's job was to sit by the front door and check in the homeless as they came.

Many people came through the door, including two families with kids in tow. The evening passed by quickly, but seeing those children touched Amy deeply as she followed the process of getting everyone checked in.

When the group's shift was over, they met together to talk about how everything went. Amy listened to others share their thoughts

while her own were percolating. She thought back to those families with young children and she suddenly realized why the emotions had swelled inside her: Those people were just like her. At any time over the past few years, one of those families could have been Amy and her kids.

God was stirring in Amy's heart, and as she talked with Pam and the others, she expressed a new desire: to make sure that this wouldn't continue for anyone.

Within two weeks, Amy met Sincerria, who was living in her car with her son. Immediately, she became her friend and advocate, helping her find a place to live and a job to pay for it. Today Sincerria is back on her feet, and Amy has come to know Jesus herself, largely because she had the chance to serve and reflect on what God was saying to her.



**Getting Ready:** Noticing, Praying, Listening  
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3. In a small group of Christians wanting to grow in these practices
4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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**Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.**

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# The Art of Sharing

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**9.1 WHY SHARE?**

**9.2 WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO SHARING?**

**9.3 HOW CAN WE SHARE OUR STORY?**

**9.4 HOW CAN WE SHARE GOD'S STORY?**





# WHY SHARE?

## the **big** idea

Share your faith in Jesus because you genuinely care about people and know that Jesus can meet their deepest need.

### **ice breaker**

Have you ever had a friend try to sell you something you didn't want to buy or talk you into an activity you didn't want to do? How did that make you feel?

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### **related Scripture**

*But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*

1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*If you really believe in the redeeming and transforming power of God's presence in a person's life, then the single greatest gift you can give someone is an explanation of how to be rightly connected to him.*

– Bill Hybels

## GENUINE LOVE FOR OTHERS SHOULD BE OUR MOTIVATION

International evangelist Luis Palau's research shows that 75% of all those who come to Christ do so through a relationship with a Christian friend, relative, or coworker. The Institute of American Church Growth reports an even higher percentage, with almost 90% of the 14,000 Christians polled saying they came to Christ through "a friend or relative who invested in a relationship with them."<sup>1</sup>

As you develop intentional relationships with people who are different from you—people who may not yet know Christ—you begin to see them differently. You want the best for them, and you're convinced that knowing Jesus would give not just assurance for eternity, but the most fulfilling life right here and now. You care deeply for them, and you don't want to spend eternity without them.

**1 DISCUSS ::** Was your faith encounter with Jesus primarily through relationships with people you knew or through some other avenue? Why do you think the percentage of those who come to Christ through relationships is so high?

The first reason to share your faith in Jesus should be genuine love and concern for the other person, not your own agenda or a sense of obligation. If we share our faith because we think we're "supposed" to or because we think, perhaps subconsciously, that we'll earn God's favor or some sort of divine "credit," people quickly detect our tainted motives and we will alienate them. Sharing our faith is not like closing a sales deal. Out of love, we are sharing our experience and understanding of who Jesus is and how someone can relate to him. We are not "selling" Jesus to them.

In the movie *The Big Kahuna*, Phil, a salesman, confronts the young, zealous Christian coworker, Bob, about his motives for heavy-handed proselytizing on the job:

"It doesn't matter whether you're selling Jesus or Buddha or civil rights or 'How to Make Money in Real Estate with No Money Down.' That doesn't make you a human being; it makes you a marketing rep. If you want to talk to somebody honestly, as a human being, ask him about his kids. Find out what his dreams are—just to find out, for no other reason. Because as soon as you lay your hands on a conversation to steer it, it's not a conversation anymore; it's a pitch. And you're not a human being; you're a marketing rep."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Larry Ondrejcek in "What Is Relational Evangelism?" *Grace & Truth Magazine*, October 2000.

<sup>2</sup> John Swanbeck (Director), *The Big Kahuna* [motion picture], 1999.

**2 PRACTICE ::** Have some fun by getting two volunteers to exaggerate some of the bad ways to share your faith. Then have the group debrief, sharing why those “techniques” don't work, and what does. As much as possible, don't speak theoretically, but use real examples from your own life.

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We as Christians need to treat others as humans, not objects of a sales and marketing ploy. As we get to know people and truly care about them, we are able to help make the authentic connection between their humanity and the message of Jesus. The goal of what we share is not “Let's get you to heaven!” The goal is “I would love for you to meet Jesus because he really loves you.” We are introducing people to him. He is real life, meaningful life, abundant life, hope-filled life. Jesus is not “a way to heaven.” He is the Way to God! We share Jesus because he is real life now and for eternity. As Colossians 3 teaches, *your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory* (verses 3-4, NLT).

**3 DISCUSS ::** Think of someone close to you who seems distant from God. Share a few things you know about that person's spiritual journey.

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How can you show your love and concern in ways that will prevent them from thinking they are your evangelistic “project”?

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### JESUS MEETS OUR DEEPEST NEED

The second reason to share our faith in Christ is because we sincerely believe the gospel has met our deepest need and will meet everyone else's deepest need. What makes us willing to take the risk of sharing our story and God's story? Why face our fears and risk rejection or criticism? It's simply that we've come to the conviction that the gospel is not just true for us but that it is *good news that will bring great joy to all people* (Luke 2:10, NLT).

The gospel—that Jesus died for our sins, that Jesus rose from the dead, and that Jesus is Lord of all things—defines the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15). Of course, the gospel isn't just knowing these things; it is responding and accepting for ourselves what Christ has done. The gospel is the incredible message that God has provided us a way to be in relationship with him now and always through Jesus Christ, and that all things will be brought under the sovereign authority of our good God.

An important part of sharing Jesus with spiritual seekers is to be aware of how God might be at work in their current circumstances to bring them to himself. They may trust you enough to open up about a health issue, a problem at work, or a difficult relationship. And while you may have both a listening ear and wise counsel for those issues, you can also share, if the Spirit leads you, about how God has met a similar need in your life. Share simply, honestly, and transparently. Also be attentive to Scripture that God may reveal to you for that specific situation, and prayerfully and sensitively share it with your friend.

**4 DISCUSS ::** Think of the person you identified in the previous discussion question. What need have you noticed in that person's life that he/she is willing to acknowledge?

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What similar need have you experienced that Jesus has met in your life?

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There is a phenomenon called “phantom limb syndrome” that occurs to people who have experienced amputation. People with this condition experience sensations, often including pain, as if the limb were still there. In a similar way, before we come into relationship with God, our souls experience the pain of something that is missing from our lives. Whether consciously or only subconsciously, we are sensing not just the absence of a limb, but the absence of all of life as it is intended to be. Anything we might use to try to fill that emptiness will fail, because until we are united with God, we simply aren’t whole.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV) describes our longing by noting that God has *set eternity in the human heart*. Missionary Don Richardson presents startling evidence of this principle in his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Having studied cultures around the world, he discovered terms and concepts related to the one true God embedded in every one, preparing them for the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

As you walk alongside your friends, God may show you specific ways in which he has prepared them for the message of the gospel. You may also begin to see evidence of emptiness in their lives, emptiness that they are not even likely to recognize. The reality and fullness of your life in Jesus will increase your desire for them to know him as well—and that’s a great reason to share your faith!

**5 DISCUSS ::** Why is your experience of God such an important part of what you have to offer your not-yet-Christian friends?

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**GOD IS WORTH KNOWING**

The third reason to share your faith in Jesus is because God is worth knowing. There is a popular activity in the U.S. around the holidays called a “white elephant” gift exchange. Presents are wrapped, but they are actually things people want to get rid of. The intent is to have a good laugh as you re-gift to someone else a useless gift you have previously received.

Compare that kind of “sharing” to giving the gift of a personal relationship with God. Sharing our faith is the complete opposite of this. Unlike the re-gifted hand-crocheted beer can hat, having God’s presence is something we cherish. Of course, as we give that gift, we don’t lose it; our faith is actually strengthened and increased by sharing—it multiplies. Further, we sincerely want the person to have this gift—we know the priceless value of forgiveness, of new life, of having God a part of every moment. We’re convinced that God is worth knowing. We have found “the pearl of great price”—that treasure that makes all others seem like worthless trinkets—and its beauty and value is something we’re glad to show to the world.

In his book *Just Walk Across the Room*, pastor Bill Hybels urges Christians to take the first step: to “walk across the room” and initiate a conversation with people they might not ordinarily speak to. He writes, “In my experience, the people who find themselves taking walks across rooms have first landed on the belief that the God they know is worth knowing.”<sup>4</sup>

**6 DISCUSS ::** Which of these three reasons for sharing is most compelling to you, and why?

- genuine love and concern for others
- personal experience that God has met your deepest need
- conviction that God is worth knowing

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<sup>3</sup> Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts: Startling Evidence of Belief in the One True God in Hundreds of Cultures Throughout the World* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2005).  
<sup>4</sup> Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 27.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

In the next two days, set aside at least 15 minutes to reflect on the question, “What has knowing God added to my life?” Journal your thoughts, listing why God has been worth knowing.

Spend time praising God for each reason on your list.

Pray and look for an opportunity to share one of the reasons on your list with an unbelieving friend this week. Don't force it; watch for God to open up an opportunity.

Next time you meet, come with your list and share experiences you had from this practice.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Our sincere belief in the power of the gospel, the priceless value of our own relationship with God, and genuine love for

those we know will lead us to share our faith with others. We share our faith in Jesus because we know that Jesus can meet their deepest need.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Becoming a Contagious Christian* by Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg (Zondervan)
- *How to Give Away Your Faith* by Paul Little (InterVarsity Press)
- *Irresistible Evangelism* by Steve Sjogren, Dave Ping, and Doug Pollock (Group Publishing)
- *Just Walk Across the Room* by Bill Hybels (Zondervan)
- *Out of the Salt Shaker and Into the World* by Rebecca Manley Pippert (InterVarsity Press)

## QPlace STORY

Sitting in the salon chair every six weeks for several years, Mary had learned a lot about Wendy, her hairdresser. When Wendy was in her mid-thirties, her mother and father had died. She had also endured two painful divorces and the loneliness of being a single mom with two teenage daughters. As she turned forty, Wendy had just broken off a relationship with a man who had been cheating on her, and she was desperate to find peace in her current circumstances.

Wendy's pain and desperation reminded Mary of herself as a teenager, when her mother had become very ill and she didn't know who to turn to and how to move forward. In that time of crisis, she had gone to a weekend retreat where she was introduced to Jesus.

So, there in the salon chair, Mary briefly shared her background, her story of inviting Jesus into her life, and how Jesus had met her deepest need and made all the difference in her circumstances. Then Mary asked, “Wendy, are you a Christian?”

“Well, I don't go to church,” Wendy responded.

“That's not what makes you a Christian,” Mary replied.

“Then what makes you a Christian?”

Mary thought, *I can't believe she just asked me that question!* And she prayed silently, *Lord, help me to state this clearly.* The message of Romans 10:9 came to Mary's mind.

“Well, it says in the Bible that ‘If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.’”

To Mary's surprise, Wendy responded that she believed Jesus was God, that he died for her sins, and that she was ready to give her life to him. Then she did!

And not long after that holy moment at a hair salon, Mary joined Wendy at a nearby lake—and witnessed the baptism of her hairdresser friend, who had also found what she needed in Jesus.



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**Q Place empowers Christians  
to engage in meaningful  
conversations about God with  
people who believe differently.**

# WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO SHARING?

## the big idea

By understanding the common barriers to sharing our faith, we can navigate past them to invite others into a relationship with God.

### ice breaker

When was one of the first times you shared your faith? Recall the experience and share your memory of how you felt (afraid, awkward, excited, embarrassed, etc.).

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### related Scripture

*And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.*

Colossians 4:3-4 (NIV)

### challenging wisdom

*And who is to bring the knowledge that will answer life's great questions to our world today? That would be you. If you are a follower of Jesus...you have a calling far more important than you may know.*

– John Ortberg

*Followers of Christ in a pluralistic society must be willing and able to engage those they disagree with in constructive conversations... Salt is only useful when it's good, active and engaged—doing what it's supposed to do where it's supposed to be.*

– Gabe Lyons

## WE ARE UNCLEAR ABOUT THE GOSPEL AND HOW TO EXPLAIN OUR EXPERIENCE

Francis Chan, noted author, speaker, pastor, and church planter said:

The biggest problem with evangelism is that it's gotten too impersonal. People in the church don't know how to look an unbeliever in the eye and actually love him or her and carry on a conversation with them. . . . I think overall, the church is going to get weaker and weaker in this area, and it's not because they don't love Jesus. It's not because they don't have a heart for the Lord. They just don't know how to engage with people who don't believe like they do.<sup>1</sup>

To engage with people who believe differently, we must identify and overcome three primary hurdles in sharing our faith: (1) We're unclear about our understanding of the gospel and how to explain our experience with God, (2) we are afraid we'll receive a negative response, (3) we think that evangelism is the job of the "professionals." By facing and understanding these barriers, we can learn helpful practices to overcome them.

**1 DISCUSS ::** For you, what is the biggest hurdle to sharing your faith with others?

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Orme, "A Candid Talk with Francis Chan on Evangelism and Mission," *Outreach Magazine*, October 25, 2012, <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/people/4922-francis-chan-why-the-church-is-weak-at-evangelism.html>.

We can conquer the first hurdle to sharing our faith by getting clear on our own understanding of the gospel. We live in an age when we are inundated with information that blends truth and fiction. We have been fed sound bites and unwittingly become careless about sifting through truth and untruth with discernment. We forward alarmist or sentimental emails without validating their content—sometimes thinking we’re doing a noble thing to publicize such warnings or pass on such “encouragement.” We find something on the internet or read something in a book and think, *It must be true!*—just because it is in writing.

We’re accustomed to sitting in church or watching religious broadcasts and nodding approvingly to the gospel teaching—even if we don’t understand it fully. Bad and good reasoning are mixed and we have a hard time telling the difference. We latch on to the “easy” or comforting aspects of Jesus’ teaching, but find ourselves laying aside his more challenging words. Or conversely, we seize onto a difficult or controversial teaching and make it central—overshadowing the clear and unambiguous truths that are at the core of what Jesus wants others to know.

The apostle Paul recognized this obstacle. He asked the church at Colossae to *pray that I may proclaim [the gospel] clearly, as I should* (Colossians 4:4, NIV).

**2 DISCUSS ::** How would you describe your ability to clearly explain the gospel to people who have a different worldview? Explain your answer.

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It’s a common tendency to focus on the “boundary markers” that set Christians apart from other faiths. In Jesus’ day, the Jews thought circumcision, Sabbath rules, and dietary issues were paramount; but Jesus put the simple acts of loving God and others before all those particulars. We may be tempted to buy into a message that seems preoccupied with what Christianity is against instead of positively sharing the goodness and beauty of life in God’s Kingdom.

Because our understanding may be shallow or selective, we can easily get tongue-tied or confused. If we practice putting our faith into words that make sense, not only will we get better at sharing God’s message, but the rigor of clarifying and succinctly expressing our beliefs will also strengthen our own faith. See *The Art of Sharing 9.4* for training and practices on how to share God’s story.

**3 DISCUSS ::** In what ways does your own lack of clarity get in the way of sharing the gospel with others? What is one possible objection or question someone might ask that would “stump” you?

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Write at least one objection or question on a separate slip of paper to use with Practice #7.

Even if we understand the gospel message clearly, we may struggle to explain how the gospel fits into our own lives and experience. We strain to explain what happened to us at such a deep, personal level. Yes, we know God personally, but what does that have to do with anyone else? Isn’t it presumptuous to think we know the way for another person? Besides, maybe our experience was supposed to be unique to us. What if we set up false expectations for another person by making our story seem like the expected standard, when in fact, our experience seems unusual?

The flip side of this barrier is when our story doesn’t seem all that remarkable. It isn’t that we haven’t given our lives to Jesus; it’s just that what happened both before and after that decision has been pretty commonplace. We’re ordinary, maybe even boring. Why would anyone look to us as an example of how God works? To find help with how to share your story, see *The Art of Sharing 9.3*.

**4 DISCUSS ::** Is your experience with God more along the lines of astonishing and hard to put into words, or ordinary and seemingly noneventful? Given the particulars of the way it unfolded for you, what are some of the ways you struggle to share your story with seekers? How could those details actually become strengths in your story?

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## WE ARE AFRAID OF RECEIVING A NEGATIVE RESPONSE

Another hurdle to overcome is our fear of receiving a negative response. At some level, we all want to be liked, and most of us avoid offending or bothering others. The fear of

being ostracized or rejected is a powerful force. Our culture has a negative stereotype of people who “proselytize,” and we don’t want to be labeled as “intolerant” or “narrow-minded” or “one of those people”—even if we do have something we believe our world desperately needs.

So we build relationships with people who are far from God, yet we don’t engage in “God talk,” or even disclose that we are Christians. We may also fear that we’ll somehow sour them on the whole idea of a relationship with God through Christ—and then it will be our fault that they close themselves off from him.

These fears can be compounded if you anticipate embarrassment in not having all the answers. Admitting “I don’t know” can sting the ego. However, most unbelievers are going to respect an honest acknowledgment that we don’t know something, and they may even find it compelling if we offer to look for answers along with them.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Tell about a time you tried to share the gospel with someone and received a negative response. How did you react? If you could do it over again, what would you do differently? How did that experience impact you?

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### WE THINK EVANGELISM IS THE JOB OF “PROFESSIONALS”

One of our biggest obstacles is thinking that sharing the good news about Jesus is a job for pastors and those with the spiritual gift of evangelism. We have adopted the mentality that we should bring our friends to someone more qualified (the pastors, evangelists, Bible experts) and they will “deliver the goods and close the deal.” We may have believed the lie that we are not adequate to engage in discipling. As a result, many of us have resigned from “evangelism,” rationalizing that “The opportunities aren’t there,” “I haven’t done this in so long and I’m not good at it any way,” or “Evangelism isn’t my gift.” Yet, God has appointed and empowered each one of us to engage in sharing the gospel and making disciples. This is not something meant to be delegated to the pastors, seminary graduates, or Bible scholars. Rather, it is something anyone can do on any day of the week.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostle Peter wrote,

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Peter 3:15 NIV).* We are all—and always—called to be prepared in advance for an opportunity to engage. And if God wants us geared up at all times, there must be many opportunities to share our faith that he is sending our way.

**6 DISCUSS ::** How have you been tempted to leave evangelism to the “professionals”? What is one step you can take to shift to a more outreach-oriented, missional mindset?

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Now that we understand these barriers, our next step will be to become equipped with skills, practices, and a lifestyle that will help us to overcome the barriers. Gaining clarity on God’s story and our own faith story will empower us to naturally share our faith with confidence. *The Art of Sharing 9.3 and 9.4* will provide the resources to help you on your journey of making disciples.

**7 PRACTICE ::** First, review the core message of the Christian faith. Pair up and practice sharing a one-minute version of that with each other.

Now, take out the slips of paper from earlier in this session. (See Discuss #3.) As a group, brainstorm two to five bullet-point responses you could offer to each of the questions or objections, with the goal of keeping a conversation about God going (not shutting it down). Note that you will not have time for exhaustive answers. The point is to get some “handles” on what might be said to quickly respond to those issues.

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Have someone compile all the responses and email the “Questions and Responses” document to all group members after the meeting.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Write out your own version of the gospel message that you can share with others. Practice telling it to other Christians and ask for feedback on how clear it is. Share it with someone who is not a Christian. Explain to the person that you have a homework assignment from a class you are taking to practice presenting a brief summary of God's story. Ask for feedback on how you might make it more clear, even if someone is not sure they believe it.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Seeing ourselves as God's ambassadors, we can overcome the barriers that keep us from fulfilling this task. We may not be clear about the message itself, we may have trouble putting

our own experience into words, we may be afraid of how people will respond to us, or we may think we should leave it to professionals. When we learn to navigate past these hurdles, they won't get in the way of effectively sharing our faith.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel (Zondervan)
- *Hard Questions, Real Answers* by William Lane Craig (Crossway)
- *How to Give Away Your Faith* by Paul Little (InterVarsity Press)
- *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* by Mark Mittelberg (Tyndale House)
- *Reimagining Evangelism* by Rick Richardson (InterVarsity Press)

## QPlace STORY

Growing up in a Christian home and church, Justin often heard people with compelling testimonies share their conversion stories. Stereotypically, they'd had a bad childhood and gone down a path of drug addiction or some other evil while ignoring God. Then they met Jesus and were radically transformed. Justin, on the other hand, had accepted Jesus as his Savior when he was about four years old, after hearing the gospel presented in his Sunday school class. What a boring testimony, he used to think.

But as he meditated on his faith journey, Justin realized that God really had written an engaging story into his life. In his early 20s, Justin went through a phase of doubt and rebellion. At the invitation of a friend, he finally started going to church again, but felt a lot of guilt and shame about how he had ignored God. Justin figured he had a long way to go spiritually to get back to where he had been.

Driving in his car one day, Justin decided to play some worship music that he had picked up at church. One particular song hit him so hard that he had to pull over. Sitting in his car in a parking lot, he told God, "I'm coming back to you." Justin was intensely aware of how far he had wandered away, and he assumed it would take a while to find his way back to God. But he was resolved to turn his life around, and he had a clear picture in his mind of doing an about-face and starting the long journey back. But as he made that "turn around" in his heart, he was surprised to discover Jesus standing right there—as if he'd been following closely all the time that he'd been running from him.

Justin realized that's what Jesus is like—even when we wander away, he keeps seeking us. Jesus sought him when he was four; he kept seeking him until he returned; and Justin realized that "He still seeks me every day so that I can live in close connection with him."



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2. In a triad of facilitators getting ready to launch a Q Place
3. In a small group of Christians wanting to grow in these practices
4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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***Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.***

# HOW CAN WE SHARE OUR STORY?

## the **big** idea

The simple story of how Jesus changed your life reveals to others the profound reality of Jesus living in you.

### **ice breaker**

Describe a time when you were asked to tell someone your personal story about what Jesus has done in your life. What was it like for you? What was their response?

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### related **Scripture**

*“One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”*  
John 9:25 (NIV)

### challenging **wisdom**

*Don't be afraid to speak from personal experience; in many ways, those vulnerable moments will be the key that unlocks a hardened heart.*  
– Luis Palau

## THE VALUE OF STORY

From an early age, we love stories. Ever-expanding numbers of children's books reveal the hunger children have to hear stories. And it's not only children who crave a good story. New books and movies are released each month to an expectant adult population of all ages, stages, backgrounds, and ethnic groups.

Each of us has a compelling story worth sharing—your story of how God intersected your life and offered you his free gift of salvation, transforming your life here and now and for all eternity. As American literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall puts it, “We are creatures of story, and the process of changing one mind or the whole world must begin with ‘Once upon a time.’”<sup>1</sup> When you share your story, you connect your story with the listener's story and with God's story. Your story is a real experience of the power of God—not an abstract idea—which can generate questions, move others, and inspire action. Your story captures both the head and the heart of the listener *and* can move people to consider things they never have or would have considered.

**1 DISCUSS ::** Think of a favorite real-life story told by a family member or longtime friend. Briefly share the topic of that story and what makes it compelling for you.

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Jesus was well aware of the power of a good story. His parables of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, and the seeds planted on different types of soil were stories that painted pictures in people's minds and allowed truth to penetrate their hearts as they continued to think through them. Over time they could discover more and more what the stories really revealed about God and themselves. In addition, every day Jesus created new stories as he interacted with people around him. Stories about blind and sick people being healed. Stories about thousands being fed with a few loaves of bread and fish. Stories of Jesus with his followers, religious leaders, and “sinners.” The four Gospels are filled with real stories that help us know what Jesus is like.

**2 DISCUSS ::** Why do you think Jesus used stories so often in his teaching?

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People who are just beginning to explore the life of Jesus are likely to believe that the stories in the Gospels give them an understanding of Jesus in first-century Israel. But the story of how Jesus has impacted *your* life makes a radical statement that he is living and active today, that he is personally and uniquely an integral part of your life now.

Jesus says he came “*that [we] may have life, and have it to the full*” (John 10:10, NIV). The apostle Paul reveals in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that as soon as we belong to Jesus, we become a new person. We are not the same anymore; our old life has gone and a new life has begun. Our personal faith story keys into this reality and answers this basic question: *What difference has Jesus made in your life?* In other words, what were you like before knowing Jesus and what was your life like without him? How did you make your decision to follow Jesus? And finally, what are you like now, after you have had a relationship with Jesus for a while?

**3 DISCUSS ::** Have you heard other people tell their stories of faith in Jesus? What was your reaction?

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Was it helpful to hear their stories? Why or why not?

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## GUIDELINES FOR TELLING YOUR FAITH STORY

We don’t usually get numerous opportunities or unlimited time to tell our faith story to people God has placed in our lives. Consider it a great privilege when it happens. This is a chance to share something of great value in your life with someone else. It is a humble, genuine moment. It is not a memorized strategy to “download” on someone without discretion. If you are willing to share what God has done

in your life, God will orchestrate a time and place for a conversation. Learn to listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit to know when it’s appropriate to share your faith story.

When that opportunity comes along, here are four simple guidelines to help you tell it well:

### 1. Be Brief

Tell the whole story in less than two or three minutes or in less than 100 words. This may seem very short to you; but to your listener, it may seem like a long time. You are much better off leaving them wanting more rather than wishing you had never started talking. If they want more, they will ask follow-up questions. Keep the follow-up discussion more dialogue than monologue. In this way your listener has more control in determining the length of the conversation.

### 2. Be Clear

Don’t tell weird or complicated story lines. People don’t usually have the tolerance or interest to make sense of things that might have great meaning to you but are hard to understand or can quickly categorize you as a “religious nut.”

### 3. Use Common Language

In your faith story, try to use ordinary language and avoid Christian buzzwords. Compose your story in such a way that it can be understood by Christians and non-Christians alike. Terms like “born again” and “accepting Jesus” are not phrases usually used outside of a church context. If you have to use words that you don’t think will resonate with your listener, then define them casually within the conversation. (For example, “Then I realized that my problem was sin—I did wrong and selfish things all the time in a way I couldn’t change on my own.”)

### 4. Be humble and sincere

Christians can come across as superior, arrogant, or self-righteous when they tell their stories. Avoid criticizing the church, organizations, or other people. It’s probably better not even to mention church denominations in your story. However, it’s important for us to understand the main difference between people who have found a relationship with Jesus and those who haven’t. Christians know they are sinners in need of someone to save them, which means they recognize their continuous need for him. This understanding should produce a deep sincerity and humility in us as we interact with everyone—Christians and non-Christians alike.

**4 DISCUSS ::** Which of the four guidelines listed will be most difficult for you in developing your faith story? Why?

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Which will be the easiest? Why?

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## STRUCTURE OF YOUR FAITH STORY

In telling your story, answer these three questions:

1. What were you like before knowing Jesus?
2. How did you end up placing your trust in Jesus?
3. What are you like now after becoming a follower of Christ?

Jesus transforms each of us, but sometimes when we try to describe specifically what he has done, it takes thought to put the change into words. Be honest about your own process—don't make up something that sounds more dramatic than it is; it's also helpful to share the uncertainties and struggles that still remain. But if you are a true Christ-follower, he has certainly made some difference, and that is what you need to share.

**5 PRACTICE ::** Tell your story.

- Pair up with someone.
- Briefly share your faith stories. (Keep it to under two minutes.)

## BEFORE AND AFTER

On the website [www.2wordstory.com](http://www.2wordstory.com) people share the “story” of their lives with only two simple words, reducing the description of their life-change into its most basic elements.

Fear . . . Free  
 Insecure . . . Confident  
 Lost . . . Found  
 Accepted? . . . Accepted!

Every story has a before and an after, and the after is better than the before because of Jesus.

To understand the strength of this approach, consider how the weight loss industry leverages the before and after portraits of people who joined their programs. The transformation that happens in us when we come to know Jesus is a much more profound life-changing gift than any weight loss program can provide! The question here is how can we communicate *that* “success story” well to others?

Try to find one word or phrase that easily identifies who you were before you met Jesus and who you are now that you have a relationship with him. We see several good examples in the Bible. One of the simplest faith stories is found in John 9:25, where the blind man has been healed by Jesus and is being questioned by the Pharisees. They grill him with questions: Was he born blind? Can he now see? How did this happen? Then all eyes are on him to answer. The former blind man says to them, “*One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!*” His transformation was clear—from blindness to sight. For you, it might be a “before” life consumed with guilt and shame that is changed to one that is filled with grace and freedom “after” you received the forgiveness and power of Jesus.

**6 PRACTICE ::** Share your *before* and *after*.

- Go back to the pairs that you formed in the previous practice.
- Try to identify the key themes of what your life was like before Jesus and what it is like now. Capture those themes in just a few words. Your partner may be able to help you see the big picture of your story.
- On one side of a piece of paper, write down in big letters the word or phrase that described your life before you met Jesus. On the other side, write a word or phrase about your life now, after knowing his love and forgiveness.
- As a group, share your before-and-after stories by reading only those words on each side of the page. For example, in the case of the blind man from John 9:25 above, one side of his page would read “Blind” and the other side would read “Can See.”

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

**1. Review** and refine the three parts of your story and take the time to write it out fully. Then decide which details to exclude or add so you can share your story well. Don't "over-share," but use your brief story to pique curiosity and prompt your listener to ask follow-up questions. The goal is to engage him or her in a spiritual conversation—a dialogue, not a monologue.

**2. Practice** sharing your story in two minutes or less with a Christian friend or family member. The more you share your story, the easier and more natural it will get.

**3. Look** for divine appointments. Be prepared. Be willing. Be brief. Ask God to give you opportunities to share your two-word or two-minute story, and when he does, humbly take the risk.

## QPlace STORY

When a friend asked Colin what difference Jesus really made in his life, he was ready with his simple story. "Before I placed my trust in Jesus, the focus of my life was my success and me. Through high school, I worked really hard to succeed at everything I did—that was my number-one focus. People might not have known it about me, but because of this focus I was proud—and to be honest, pretty selfish. I had grown up in a church-going family and I knew about Jesus, but for me Jesus was a Sunday idea instead of a 24/7 person whom I knew, listened to, and wanted to honor.

"I placed my trust in Jesus Christ when I was a senior in high school. My youth leader sat me down for nachos and said: 'When are you going to quit thinking about Jesus and start following him?' That question hit me pretty hard, and I realized that while I knew about Jesus in my head, I wasn't following him with my heart. I hadn't made

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

A simple structure and a clear focus will enable you to share your story in a compelling way that will help people see the reality and power of Jesus in your life and lead them to desire a relationship with him.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Becoming a Contagious Christian* by Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg (Zondervan)
- *Irresistible Evangelism* by Steve Sjogren, Dave Ping, Doug Pollock (Group Publishing Inc.)
- *Just Walk Across the Room* by Bill Hybels (Zondervan)
- *Out of the Salt Shaker & into the World* by Rebecca Manley Pippert (InterVarsity Press)
- *Telling the Story: Evangelism for the Next Generation* by Luis Palau and Timothy Robnett (Regal Books)

him the leader of my life. Right there, I prayed to Jesus and accepted his gift of forgiveness and new life. There weren't any fireworks, but I knew that my life would never be the same."

As Colin concluded his personal story, he briefly shared what his life is like now. "Now that I have new life in Jesus Christ, I know that I'm a son of God. Jesus isn't an idea to me—he's my hope, my forgiver, my life. It's still easy for me to lose focus, but Bible reading, journaling, and being a part of a small group help me stay on track. God is continuing his work in me, and I see that he's making me more humble and giving me opportunities to serve others. God loves me, and my focus is to love and serve him with my life."

Colin's short story could read: Before, I was self-focused, then I met Jesus personally, and now I am God-focused.



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**Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.**

# HOW CAN WE SHARE GOD'S STORY?

## the **big** idea

When we are clear on the essentials of the gospel message, we can share God's story easily with people who want to hear it.

### **ice breaker**

What is the biggest obstacle for you when sharing God's story?

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### **related Scripture**

*When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."*

Acts 2:37-38 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*For many, understanding the gospel is like understanding a mathematical problem. They hear the mathematical problem explained in class and clearly understand it as the professor goes through it. But when a friend who cut the class asks them to explain the problem, they're at a loss to do it in terms that are clear enough for the friend to grasp.*

– Paul Little

## START BRIEF AND SET UP FOR WANTING MORE

Every year, movie producers filter through hundreds of screenplays to find the next great film. To get their attention, writers create a simple plot description with an emotional "hook." It's called the "logline." Here's an example: "A young man and woman from different social classes fall in love aboard an ill-fated voyage at sea."<sup>1</sup> Screenwriters have found that a clear and concise logline is essential to stimulate interest in their story so that studio executives will give the pivotal invitation: "Tell me more."

How can our approach to sharing God's story be more like a logline and less like a lecture? What if it took only 15 – 30 seconds to share? What if we told the story of God's incredible offer of love, grace, and real life in such a concise, compelling way that seekers burned with curiosity and really wanted us to tell them more?

On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter was speaking to crowds of Jews in Jerusalem when he summarized the gospel

for them in twelve words: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." Clearly, under God's conviction, they ask a direct question, "Brothers, what shall we do?" and that prompts Peter to bottom-line the essence of the gospel message: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:36-38, NIV).

**1 DISCUSS ::** How clear do you think you are on the gospel message? If asked, how would you summarize it?

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## KNOW GOD'S STORY

In *Organic Outreach for Churches*, pastor and author Kevin Harney reminds his readers that one of the greatest joys

we have as followers of Jesus is to communicate his gospel message to others. While the settings, circumstances, and words will vary, the message itself should be clear and simple. Using Kevin's own paraphrased statements and Scripture references, this is a simple way to share the good news with anyone who does not know Jesus:

- God knows everything about us, and he still loves us beyond description (Psalm 86:15; 1 John 3:1).
- Human beings have broken their relationship with God by rebelling against him and doing things that are opposed to his will. The Bible calls this sin (Romans 3:23 and 6:23).
- God solved the problem of our sin by sending his only Son to pay the price for our wrongs. Jesus died in our place on the cross, and he rose again to release heavenly power that sets us free. Through faith in Jesus, we can be forgiven, restored, and healed (John 3:16; 1 John 4:10).
- We can put our faith in Jesus, confess our sins, and invite him to become the leader of our lives and closest friend. When we do this, we are born again, we are washed clean, heaven becomes our eternal home, and our lives on this earth have new purpose and meaning (1 John 1:9; Psalm 103:12; Romans 10:9-10).
- Once we receive Jesus as the one who forgives our sins and leads our lives, we begin a new adventure of following him every day (Romans 12:1-3).<sup>2</sup>

There's a big gap for most of us between understanding the gospel and being able to explain it to someone else. We "get it" when it comes to God's story, facts of Christianity, and themes of the Bible. We may know the right answers to a list of multiple-choice questions. But, could we actually share with someone the basics of Christianity without notes? The first step is to know clearly and concisely the essence of the Christian message so that we can explain it to someone. It's something worth practicing so that you are prepared when God presents an opportunity.

**2 DISCUSS ::** With brevity and specificity that doesn't sound insulting or condescending, what is the simple message God wants us to share with people?

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## BE EQUIPPED TO ILLUSTRATE GOD'S STORY

When you are at the point in a relationship of explaining God's story, you have done the hard work of building trust and have earned the right to explain the gospel message. This is a high-risk, high-trust interaction. If you have not invested relationally in the person you are about to share with, there is a good chance it will not be warmly received.

Just as Jesus modeled teaching through storytelling, it's a good idea to know several simple analogies and illustrations to help you tell God's story clearly. However, filter them into a conversation rather than presenting them as a monologue. While you're sharing, continue to notice, pray, listen, and ask questions so that you're in tune with the person you're sharing with. It's much more than a quick presentation. Be sure to choose illustrations carefully, paying attention to what might resonate most with that person and his or her questions about God.

Here are a few simple, time-tested illustrations:

### 1. The Bridge

The Bible tells us: *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 6:23, ESV). On a piece of paper, draw a stick-figure person on the left side. Write the word *Us* under it. On the right side, write the word *God*. Draw a horizontal line above each word, with lines extending down so it looks like there are two cliffs with a wide gap between *Us* and *God*. Explain that because each of us has moral failures (what the Bible calls "sin"), we have all "earned" separation from God, or spiritual death. (Write the word *death* at the bottom of the paper.) There's a gap between us and God. We can't jump across the gap or earn our way across it. Trying to cross it ourselves leads to death. The only thing that can bridge the gap is Jesus. (Draw a cross that connects the two cliffs, connecting *Us* to *God*.) He made a connection possible; now all that remains is for us to walk across the way he's given us by accepting Christ as the forgiver and leader of our lives.<sup>3</sup>

**3 PRACTICE ::** Practice this illustration with a partner.

## 2. Do vs. Done

On a piece of paper, write the word *DO*. Explain that a common misconception about Christianity is that it (like all religions) consists of a set of rules to be obeyed or practices in which to engage, all so that we can earn God's approval. This frame of reference sees religion as *DO*; it is all about our activity, self-improvement, and hard work. Now add the letters "N-E" at the end to spell *DONE*. Explain that becoming a Christian is about accepting what Christ has done—not about our doing. The new birth Jesus talked about actually comes from ceasing to do anything we think would earn God's favor (which is, if you think about it, spiritual pride masquerading as "good character"). Like a child, we are to accept that it is done and there's nothing we can add to Jesus' finished work on the cross. We don't earn forgiveness through a life of dos and don'ts—that would be impossible, even if we tried. Instead, it's already done; so we simply accept God's grace as a gift and experience a new life by faith.<sup>4</sup>

**4 PRACTICE ::** Practice this illustration with a partner.

## 3. Believe + Receive = Become

Following John 1:12 (NIV), you can write this equation on a piece of paper to explain the simple steps to accepting Jesus: *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*

First, explain that you need to believe Jesus is who he said he was—the Son of God. But, it is not enough just to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. You need to receive that truth into your heart and soul. Once you have done that, you become his child, adopted into his family, forgiven of your sins and promised hope and life at its fullest now and into eternity.

**5 PRACTICE ::** Practice this illustration with a partner.

## MAKE A PERSONAL INVITATION

At a point in your illustration discussion, you can ask the person, "Where would you put yourself on a 1–10 continuum?" with 1 = "I believe that there are many ways to God, and Jesus might be one of them," 5 = "I'm not sure if anyone really knows if there is only one way to God," and 10 = "I believe that there is only one way to God, through Jesus."<sup>5</sup> Depending on how they answer, follow up with one of these questions:

- What could move you more toward believing in Jesus as your Leader, Forgiver, and Rescuer?
- Would you be willing to ask Jesus to make himself real to you?
- Is there anything that's preventing you right now from accepting Jesus' offer of a relationship with God through him?

Telling someone about Jesus is different from asking them to actually open themselves to him—either by way of investigation, or if they are ready to receive his forgiveness. Just knowing God's story is not enough—the devil knows lots of Bible truths. God wants our hearts; we need to respond and surrender our lives to him.

You can lead the person in a simple prayer, either to ask that Jesus make himself real to the person, or to invite Jesus to be their leader (Lord) and forgiver (Savior). One way to structure this prayer is with the simple outline **Help, Sorry, Thanks**:

**Help**, I need your forgiveness, God.

**Sorry** for the way I've shut you out of my life.

**Thanks** for what you did for me in Jesus.

**6 DISCUSS ::** Think back to the time that you decided to put your faith in Jesus. Did someone invite you to personally accept Jesus? If not, what caused you to actually respond to God?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What are some phrases you can think of to help you make an invitation in a natural and authentic way—without churchy-sounding words or pretense?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

<sup>4</sup> For a video example of "Do vs. Done," see: <http://www.sunchurch.tv/discipleship/DoDone.html>

<sup>5</sup> Garry Poole, *Seeker Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 296.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Get together this week with someone who will practice with you. Role-play presenting the gospel using one of the illustrations of your choice, while the other person takes the role of a seeker. Then practice offering a personal invitation to which they can respond. Switch roles and have the other person do the presenting.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Without a clear understanding of the basic elements of the Christian message, we won't be able to explain it to others. Some clear illustrations can help you communicate God's story in a compelling way. We need to be ready to share this information with anyone we meet, enthusiastically and

authentically letting them know what God has done for us and what he wants to do for them.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Becoming a Contagious Christian* by Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg (Zondervan)
- *The Explicit Gospel* by Matt Chandler (Crossway)
- *How to Give Away Your Faith* by Paul Little (InterVarsity)
- "The Ladder of Goodness" illustration: <http://www.sunchurch.tv/discipleship/Ladder.html>
- <http://www.palau.org/resources/know-jesus/item/how-can-i-know-jesus> (helpful explanation of how to know Jesus)

## QPlace STORY

Dan met Johnny on the bleachers just before his flag football game. They connected quickly over sports and Italian food. Within a couple of weeks the conversations naturally transitioned from sports to more substantive spiritual topics. Johnny had questions about his religious upbringing and wondered about this Jesus who Dan talked about. What the sidelines didn't allow, the local restaurant did: food, and an opportunity to talk more deeply.

With Johnny's permission, Dan took his best stab at summing up what the Bible teaches about Christ, why he had to come, and what it all means for our lives. Using two water glasses and a straw, Dan laid out the classic Bridge Illustration in full 3D: The glasses represented us and God; the distance between the glasses, the separation caused by our moral failure. But thank God for the straw—that is, Jesus, who alone bridged the gap through his life, death, and resurrection.

Feeling bold because of his deepening friendship with Johnny, Dan

issued a challenge. "Johnny, there are just two kinds of people in the world: those swimming around in this glass without God, and those on this side who've crossed over and are now swimming in this glass with God. Which one are you?" Johnny indicated that he had never asked Christ to be his Savior and Leader, and politely declined Dan's invitation.

"Not ready!" he said.

Dan replied, "Fine. Then you can pay the bill."

After a good laugh, the two parted with the understanding that Johnny's decision wouldn't affect their relationship.

Two weeks later, Dan got a call. "Yo, Dan... I did it." Dan knew right away what that was about. Johnny had crossed over the straw, and now, through Jesus, he was on God's side!



**Getting Ready:** Noticing, Praying, Listening  
**Getting Started:** Asking Questions, Loving, Welcoming  
**Keeping It Going:** Facilitating, Serving Together, Sharing

These nine practices build a foundation for spiritual conversations to happen naturally, so you can talk about God with anyone. The 9 Arts Complete Guide has 36 interactive sessions for discussion and hands-on practice.

*Practicing the 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations: Complete Guide* can be used:

1. By individuals who desire vibrant spiritual conversations with those around them
2. In a triad of facilitators getting ready to launch a Q Place
3. In a small group of Christians wanting to grow in these practices
4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



**www.QPlace.com**  
800.369.0307  
P.O. Box 1581  
Wheaton, IL 60187

***Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.***

# APPENDIX A

## Q PLACE GUIDELINES

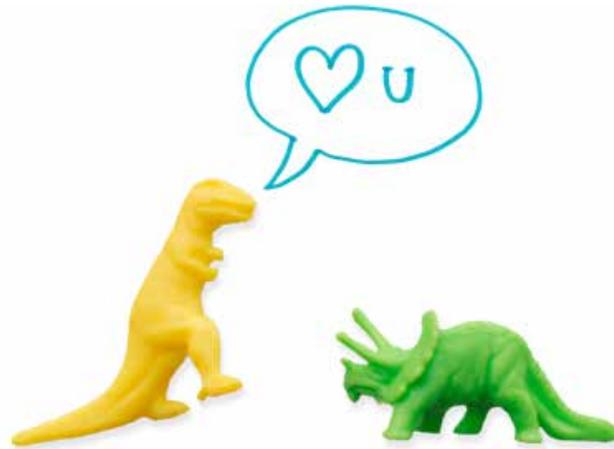
1. The purpose of a Q Place is to discuss questions about God.
2. Initiators start a Q Place and facilitate a healthy small group process.
3. Q Place is not for experts. It's for new discoveries. If you think you are an expert, resist the urge to teach. Instead, try to listen and ask questions so that everyone can discover answers for themselves.
4. The format is informal discussion, not lecture. Q Place provides resources for the discussion.
5. If at all possible, read and think through the content and questions ahead of time. Share your ideas honestly and openly.
6. In each session a different person may ask the questions in order to encourage group ownership and dynamic discussions.
7. Maintain confidentiality, courtesy, and respect toward others, even if they don't agree with your position. Do not judge others and avoid side conversations.
8. Do not attempt to resolve all differences or conflicts of opinion. Keep moving when there seems to be an impasse.
9. Begin and end on time.
10. Review the discussion guidelines whenever there's a new person in the group.

## DISCUSSION TIPS

1. Stick to the topic or passage under discussion.
2. Avoid tangents.
3. When discussing the Bible, let it speak for itself.



## How are your spiritual conversations going?



**Take the free  
Spiritual Conversations Assessment  
to identify your strengths  
and potential areas for growth.**

You could also share it with others  
so they can see how prepared they are  
to talk about God with people who believe differently.

**Free online at  
[the9arts.com/assessment](https://the9arts.com/assessment)**





## **Your next step could be to start a Q Place.**

When you have been practicing the 9 Arts and getting to know people around you, starting an ongoing discussion group with them could be a natural next step.

A Q Place is a small group for spiritual seekers—two to twelve people who get together on a regular basis to discuss questions about life, God, and the Bible.

One to three Christians start a Q Place and facilitate discussions so everyone in the group can come to conclusions at their own pace.

Learn how to create a safe place where personal dignity is valued and leadership is shared, where people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs can discuss their questions, make discoveries, and come to know God as he is revealed in the Bible.

To get started, order the book *How to Start a Q Place* and check out Q Place Coaching at [www.QPlace.com](http://www.QPlace.com).

